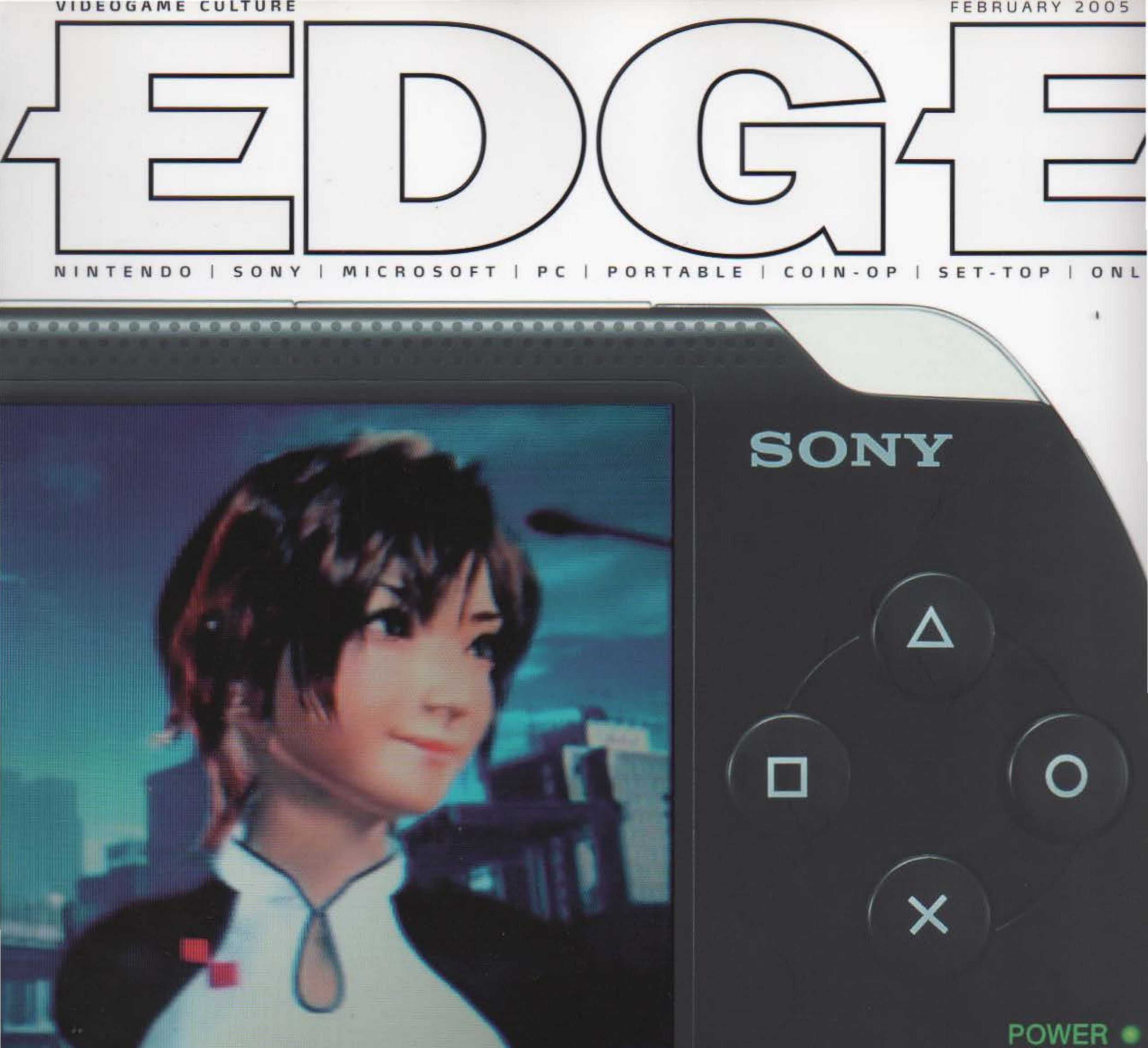
VIDEOGAME CULTURE

FEBRUARY 2005

EDGE

NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONL




Nintendo GAME BOY


GAME GEAR
SEGA


LYNX



In order to call a piece of new technology the 'sexiest slab of gaming hardware ever made' – which is how we're heralding Sony's PSP this month – you have to first consider the alternatives. Could this handheld *really* look more desirable than the scores of other examples that precede it? Well, in 1978 Atari's VCS, with its woodgrain-effect panels certainly looked... *interesting*, but you couldn't call it sexy, not even then. Sony's original PlayStation? The most you could really say about that videogame console's design is that, well, it didn't look like a videogame console. As for being sexy, again, it's not a call you could make with a straight face. Panasonic's REAL 3DO Player? Interesting shape, but no, no one bought it in preference to Atari's Jaguar simply because it looked better under their television.

When you consider what has gone before, it becomes clear that no one has ever made a console that looks this desirable. And, though this is important to those of you reading these words now – just because having the things around us look good is better than having them look banal – from Sony's perspective it's more important to the millions who aren't. The millions who didn't own a videogame console until Sony's PlayStation brand arrived.

Following on from its activity in the traditional home gaming space, with its PSP Sony is seeking to make handheld gaming a mainstream pursuit, and designing its console to be the sexiest one of all time is a supremely shrewd move. You need only look at the mobile MP3 player market to see that, even if you don't necessarily have the best features, an Apple badge and some slinky lines are enough to comprehensively crush any and all opposition.

So to a chunk of its potential userbase it's not so important what PSP *does* as what it *is*. As for the rest of us, we're interested in the whole picture, and that's something we look at this month starting on page 56, testing the hardware and also talking to developers about their experiences with the platform to date. We also report from the PSP launch (p8) and review its first wave of software, from *Ridge Racers* (p68) to *Metal Gear Acid* (p77).

Fortunately, there's a lot to like beyond those clean lines and *that* screen...



EDGE

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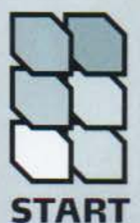


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発売!!

HARDWARE

PSP takes Japan

Nintendo makes way for Sony's own sellout



Playing to the Japanese consumer's insatiable appetite for new electronic goods is a sales strategy most local software and hardware companies have developed to laser-honed precision. Even if the Japanese technology scene had quietened somewhat since the heyday of Microsoft generating mass hysteria over a midnight Akihabaran launch for Windows 95, there was little question that Sony would engineer a spectacle for the PSP's first day of sales.

The launch of the PSP and the PS2 could not have been more similar: both machines were widely promoted for a particular hardware feature, rather than software (DVD playback for the PS2, the beauty of the widescreen and the multimedia features for the PSP). Both heavy marketing campaigns were accompanied by a limited, but convoluted, pre-order process, with Sony's online store encountering the same difficulties that it had four years ago with the PS2 launch, and many other online Japanese retailers selling out within hours of opening preorders – driving up the impetus to mob storefronts on launch day. Those who took the plunge and queued, some overnight, had a better chance of at least catching sight of a PSP, with some online customers failing to receive their machines due to chaotic stock allocation.





Several of the faithful (top) whiled away the hours with Pictochat, giving some indication that the handhelds could coexist in a far less volatile state than internet forums suggest

As usual, West Shinjuku was the place to be for new hardware, with the biggest PSP shipment scheduled for Yodobashi Camera's game store (Yodobashi being one of Japan's major discount dealers). By 5am, 900 hopeful customers were ringing the block around Yodobashi, and at 5:30 Ken Kutaragi and attendant Sony development staff arrived to celebrate the launch with an official countdown. By 6am, a civilised enough hour for the media to begin reporting on the event in earnest, some 1,500 people were assembled to collect their pre-orders, with the first few served

By 5am, 900 hopeful customers were ringing the block, and at 5:30 Ken Kutaragi and attendant Sony development staff arrived

by Kutaragi himself: in three hours, the store had sold out of its 1,500 unit allocation. The nearby Bic Camera's 1,000 units were sold out by 10am, with most other Tokyo locations ransacked in time for brunch.

Supplementing the Japanese gamers in the crowds was a large contingent of Chinese buyers, intending to purchase the machines in bulk to sell on overseas. In a considerably better organised rollout than that of the PSP itself, scouts were travelling from one store to the next to keep buyers appraised of the dwindling PSP stocks, while runners collected units to return them to waiting rented trucks. Shinjuku station was abuzz with Chinese runners, some bearing as many as ten PSPs at a time, and both these and the trucks laden with hundreds of units drew resentful glares – but nothing stronger – from the steady influx of Japanese PSP hunters.



SCE head Ken Kutaragi had already finished his stint on the counter by the time our length of the queue wound inside, leaving more experienced Yodobashi staff to frantically fill orders



The Value Pack add-ins look spectacular from an airbrushed distance, but the headphones are cheap (in both feel and sound quality), the remote only passable and the high-tensile wrist strap largely inexplicable

Tensions rose in the queues as it became apparent the Chinese brokers had devised a new strategy to maximise their profits: employing Shinjuku's homeless community to buy PSPs for them. The homeless were given money to purchase a PSP and instructions to return them to designated locations in return for a reward – predictably, some saw a more lucrative opportunity in simply escaping with the money. This resulted in some aggressive searching of the queues and streets for the absconders by furious buyers, much to the alarm of watching Sony officials.

After the tumultuous morning – evidence of which could be found in streetside cafes throughout Tokyo as bleary eyed early adopters set about exhausting the half-charged batteries on their new machines – Sony made a surprise second launch of the machine at around 1:30pm, restocking distributors with approximately the same number of units as their initial quotas. No one could be more surprised by this event than those unfortunate shoppers who had returned home empty-handed, after travelling for up to two hours by train to reach Tokyo, only to discover that the PSP was back on sale.

Post-launch figures indicated that 171,963 PSPs were sold on the 12th, some 85 per cent of the 200,000 run. Unsurprisingly, the Value Pack accounted for the majority of these sales



PSP stock (temporarily) eclipsed the promotional DS posters: the relative smoothness of Nintendo's preorder and rollout for its machine created less frantic queues – and less media attention



Shinjuku's early morning PSP deliveries arrive. Such was the speed and efficiency of Chinese export buyers that many of these PSPs were returned to the backs of waiting trucks in record time

Post-launch figures indicated that 171,963 PSPs were sold on the 12th, some 85 per cent of the 200,000-unit first production run. Unsurprisingly, the Value Pack accounted for the majority (approximately estimated to be 60 per cent) of these sales.

Software sales saw mixed numbers, with *Minna No Golf* and *Ridge Racers* (see page 68) taking the top spots at 72,859 and 65,636 sales respectively. Capcom's 2D fighter *Vampire Chronicle* (see page 82) was one of the lower-charting titles, selling 14,442 copies, while the smallest sales numbers went to Bandai's *Lumines* (see page 74) with 7,711 – however, that number accounts for nearly half of its manufacture run, a better overall performance than some of the PSP's big-name titles.

Despite difficulties with supply over the following weeks, prompting Sony to make a public apology for shortages on their homepage, PSP sales appeared to follow predictions. A little over 100,000 units sold each week, with total sales at 482,252 units by January 2.



本日発
バシカメ
ヨドバシカメ
本日発
PSP
SONY

MORE TRON 5'4" THAN TRON 2.0

Gaming tat comes in many shapes and sizes, and our drawers are stuffed with blinkers and stickers and cocktail umbrellas. A little bit more respect, however, is demanded by a life-size model of lightcycle champ Mercury from *Tron 2.0*, recently adapted from PC to Xbox. Close your eyes and you may hear the tones of Rebecca Romijn-Stamos, who provided her voice in the game. Open them and you may start to wonder how well an acting career is going if your roles always require you to be painted blue. To win Mercury, send your answer to the following question to edge@futurenet.co.uk, with 'Tron' as the subject: Which famously boozy British actor turned down the role of Dillinger/Sark in Tron? The closing date is Friday February 18, and the winner will be notified by email.

Newswire

Microsoft claims centre stage at CES

Microsoft opened 2004 with an aggressively positive statement from (senior vice president) Robbie Bach at Las Vegas' Consumer Electronics Show. The NPD figures announced demonstrated emphatically how Xbox is cementing its status as second-place console in the US. Xbox achieved a 40 per cent market share during the Christmas season, and attendant software sales were up 77 per cent on last year's numbers. The machine's attach rate is claimed to be the highest ever of any console (at 7.60), thanks in no small part to *Halo 2* (which has already sold more than *Halo: Combat Evolved* on Xbox and PC combined). The same figures show that PS2 and GameCube console sales slumped 40 and 47 per cent respectively in the same period.

The statement comes at a time when some commentators were predicting a wind-down of Xbox activities over 2005 as the company prepares for the approach of Xbox 2. Bach pre-empted such predictions by stressing the strength of Microsoft Game Studios' line-up (*Forza*, *Jade Empire* and *Conker: Live & Reloaded*). However, there's no question Xbox is about to move into its third age, with rumours of price cuts to $99 and the launch of Xbox Live Arcade, which Bach describes as being aimed at younger players.

SPECIAL REPORT

2004 is best year yet for game sales

Strong retail and quality titles drove a year in which game sales grew even as release numbers shrank

For once, not even the sceptics had anything to complain about. Thanks to a mixture of game slippage from 2003 and the resulting serendipity of scheduling, 2004 was clearly one of the golden years of gaming. And that's not just because of financial booty, although in terms of the total value of global hardware and software sales the year seems likely to mark the peak of the PlayStation2/Xbox/GameCube generation of consoles. It was also a sparkling year in terms of quality. From the success of delayed titles such as *Fable*, *The Sims 2*, *Half-Life 2*, *Doom 3* and *Halo 2* to obvious blockbusters like *GTA: San Andreas*, there was even enough spare cash in the system to reward (if only partially) the innovation of games such as *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, *Red Dead Revolver*, *SingStar* and *Far Cry*.

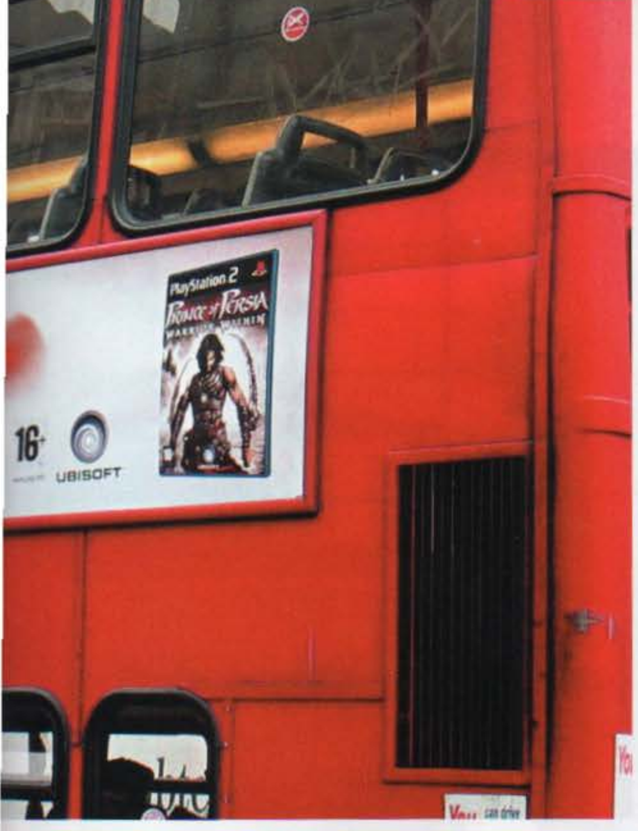
In terms of the total value of global hardware and software sales the year seems likely to mark the peak of the PlayStation2/Xbox/GameCube generation of consoles



Though Microsoft's console still has a significantly lower userbase than PS2, *Halo 2* performed magnificently at retail, especially in the US. Xbox's high attach rate (see left) clearly made a difference

Of course, there are some concrete reasons for such a halcyon state of affairs. One of the simplest is that fewer games have been released – down 18 per cent in the UK – and for this reason fewer bad games have been released. Partly this is down to the collapse of publishers such as Acclaim and Interplay, while others such as Midway, Eidos and Capcom have cut back as they reorganise their schedules. But equally, on a more positive note, the most successful publishers are also curbing their output in order to focus development and marketing attention on what they hope will be bigger-selling titles.

Perhaps the best example in this regard has been Microsoft, which reduced certain aspects of its development portfolio throughout the year. Initially cancelling its 2004 series of XSN Sports games, it then went on to completely pull out of the sector, shutting down the Redmond-based part of its sports division and selling its Salt Lake City sports developer Indie Built to Take Two. It also delayed titles such as Rare's *Kameo* and *Conker:*





San Andreas was the clear winner in the 2004 sales war, which is a significant feat for a game aimed strictly at adults only, with no chance of under-18s encountering its thrills

2004's head to heads in the UK

The winners and losers in the battle of the big hitters

Biggest seller

GTA: SAN ANDREAS VS HALO 2





Though *Halo 2* pushed *San Andreas* almost to the wire in the US, in the UK Rockstar's game was the clear winner, shifting 1m copies in nine days and 1.75m units by the end of the year

Firing blanks

GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT VS KILLZONE





Both games were originally expected to storm it in 2004, but proved disappointing. Thanks to *Rogue Agent*'s top-ten position running up to Christmas, EA must be happier than Sony

Burning rubber

BURNOUT 3 VS NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

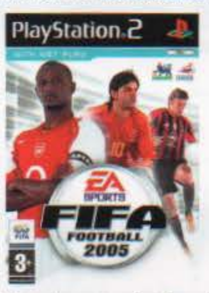




Two games from the EA garage, it's best to see this as a friendly rivalry. *NFSU 2* wins on the sales stakes, with 2004 seeing improved performance even over last year's massive original

Cup winner

FIFA 2005 VS PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 4





It's no longer true that Konami trails far behind EA on the football sales pitch, although *FIFA 2005* performed better than *Pro Evo* overall, clocking in at number two in the full-year chart

Live And Reloaded to give them time to reach their full potential.

Yet in terms of software sales, 2004 was Xbox's best year ever, something demonstrated by the success of *Halo 2*. Originally scheduled for a Christmas 2003 release, the decision was made to give in-house studio Bungie another ten months of production time. This also meant that when the game was finally released, Xbox's global installed base had grown by over five million units. The result? A strong sequel that in less than three months has already sold over six million units – more than its predecessor managed in almost three years. Interestingly, *Halo 2* even gave *GTA: San Andreas* a run for its money, with respective US sales during November 3.6 million to 3.2 million. Indeed, such was the pulling power of *Halo 2* for new Xbox owners that, in the US, the original *Halo* re-entered the top ten and seems likely to be one of the top-20 selling games of 2004 overall.

And it's this steady accumulation of console installed bases that was the underlying driver of 2004's sales. With the three consoles now priced about as low as they can go, the industry has reached the sweet point between the hardcore audience who buy six or more full-price games a year and the massmarket who buy two or three at best. Future console sales will be dominated by the super-massmarket, which may not even buy one full-price game a year. It's at this point the average price of a game rapidly drops, meaning that even though the number of games sold increases, the overall value of those combined sales drops.

For the time being, though, it's been the ideal period in which to improve upon sales figures. Another publisher taking the opportunity to improve on the past has been Ubisoft. Whereas Christmas 2003 saw critically acclaimed original games such as *Beyond Good And Evil* and *XIII* marginalised, December 2004 saw the company focused on *Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within*. In the UK the game was backed with a six-figure advertising campaign, and with the prince



Continued

2004 sales: how the year panned out

With a total of £1.34bn in sales, it's been another record year for game sales in the UK, with Christmas hits such as GTA: San Andreas, Halo 2 and The Sims 2. But what happened along the way? And which publishers won out?

One way of tracking the different moods of 2004 is to plot the increase or decrease of the weekly sales figures in comparison to the previous week's figures (see graph below). Clearly this doesn't provide absolute feedback on how successful a game's launch was – *Halo 2*'s spike is dwarfed by that of *Driver 3* thanks to its proximity to *GTA: San Andreas*, for example – but this approach does give an interesting snapshot of how 2004 developed.

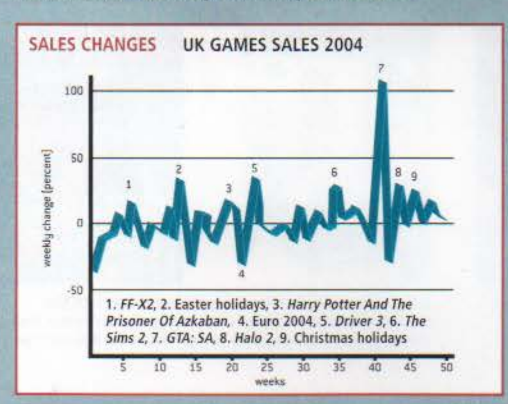
In the typically slow period after Christmas '03, Square Enix sparked the first wave of excitement with *Final Fantasy X-2*, but the year only really got underway with the start of the Easter holidays. Despite there being no single big game release, there was plenty of choice as *Far Cry*, *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, *Sonic Heroes* and *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing* all continued to ride high in the charts. With the summer in sight and game sales at their lowest – particularly thanks to the attention-stealing drama of Euro 2004 – *Driver 3* managed to create a big sales peak in June despite its lack of polish. Plenty of other games were released during the summer, with Activision's *Spider-Man 2* at number one for five weeks, although sales dropped every week until *Doom 3* came along in mid-August. However, it wasn't until EA released *The Sims 2* that the end-of-year sales period really started to heat up. *GTA: San Andreas* and *Halo 2* kickstarted the Christmas mood with a spike at the start of December underlining the final push as present-buying began in earnest.

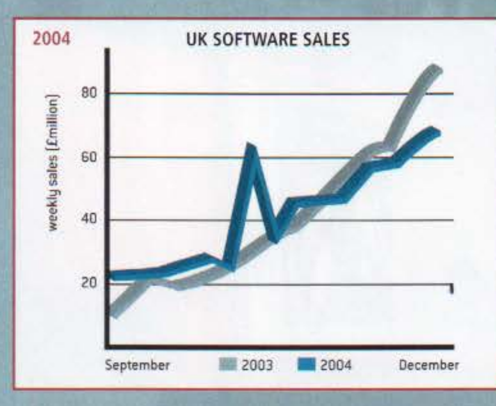
Interestingly, 2004 was down on 2003 during the usually crucial September-to-December selling period – despite the huge sales peak generated by *GTA: San Andreas* which was sustained by *Halo 2*'s release two weeks later. Reflected in anecdotal evidence from retailers that Christmas was relatively slow this year, the sheer replayabilty of Rockstar's game combined with that of *Halo 2* on Xbox Live seems to have eaten into the time and cash available for other late November and December releases.

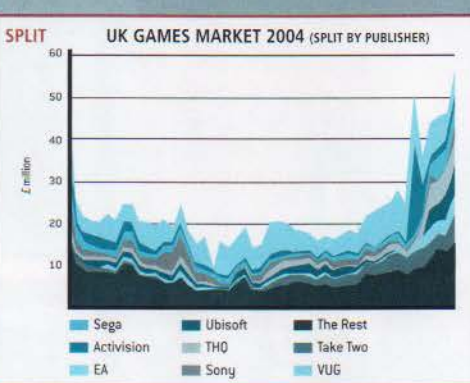
Another way of dissecting 2004 is to estimate performance on a per-publisher basis (see graph centre right). Difficult to achieve accurately without a complete set of retail numbers, this **Edge** model combines weekly software sales figures with certain assumptions about the level of sales per chart position. For clarity's sake, only the eight largest publishers are broken out, with all other publishers lumped together as 'the rest'. Obviously, it's no surprise that EA takes the biggest slice of the available pie. Despite having few singular stellar releases, it has proved the value of its annual sports titles when combined with external IPs such as Harry Potter and James Bond, as well as slow burners such as *The Sims 2*. It's also happy with the combined performance of racers *Burnout 3* and *Need For Speed Underground 2*, each of which improved on their predecessor's sales. As in 2003, Activision underlined its claim to be UK number two ahead of Take Two, which despite being the bigger company globally in terms of overall sales is becoming increasingly reliant on the *GTA* series. Activision, on the other hand, mixed externally developed titles such as *Doom 3* and *Rome: Total War* with a stable of internal games like *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* and *Call Of Duty* as well as movie-based IPs such as *Spider-Man 2*, *Shrek 2* and *Shark Tale*. Troubled publisher Vivendi Universal Games (VUG) maintained its relatively strong position thanks to the longevity of last year's goldmine, *The Simpsons: Hit And Run*, as well as *Crash* and *Half-Life 2*.

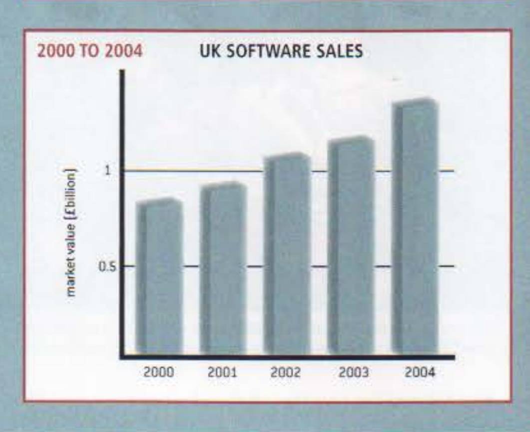
The best performing of the smaller publishers in 2004 was a rejuvenated Sega. *Sonic Heroes* proved to be one of the year's most solid performers, remaining in the charts throughout and selling over a million units in Europe. The other major fillip was its deal with Sports Interactive over the renamed *Football Manager*. Unsurprisingly the fastest-selling game in Sega Europe's history, the 'comfortably seven-figure' advertising spend was also the company's highest since Dreamcast days. Expect a wave of self-congratulatory press releases if it overtakes *CM4*.

The other companies had a relatively quiet 2004. THQ had its usual strong mix of games based on animation – everything from The Incredibles to Scooby-Doo and Fairly Odd Parents – as well as its annual WWE update but nothing to match last year's *Finding Nemo*. Similarly, Ubisoft focused on solid brands such as *Prince Of Persia*, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell*. Nothing seemed to stick for Sony, however. On paper it had a fantastic 2004 line-up with *The Getaway: Black Monday*, *Killzone*, *Jak 3*, *Rachet & Clank 3* and *Sly 2*, but none of them could be said to have performed to expectations. Even the innovative *SingStar* didn't seem to capture the public's imagination as EyeToy had done previously.









2004 UK OVERALL SALES CHART

The 20 best-sellers for the entire 12 months

- **1. GTA: San Andreas (Rockstar)**
- **2. FIFA 2005 (EA)**
- **3. Need For Speed: Underground 2 (EA)**
- **4. The Simpsons: Hit & Run (VU Games)**
- **5. Pro Evolution Soccer 4 (Konami)**
- **6. Sonic Heroes (Sega)**
- **7. Spider-Man 2 (Activision)**
- **8. Need For Speed: Underground (EA)**
- **9. Halo 2 (Microsoft)**
- **10. Driver 3 (Atari)**
- **11. The Incredibles (THQ)**
- **12. The Sims 2 (EA)**
- **13. Burnout 3: Takedown (EA)**
- **14. FIFA 2004 (EA)**
- **15. Call Of Duty: Finest Hour (Activision)**
- **16. Harry Potter: Prisoner Of Azkaban (EA)**
- **17. The Sims: Bustin' Out (EA)**
- **18. Shrek 2 (Activision)**
- **19. Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow (Ubisoft)**
- **20. Lord Of The Rings: Return Of The King (EA)**

represented in a more muscular, edgy form (to apparently appease consumers), and with more action-oriented gameplay (countering a perceived unevenness in the first title), it outperformed its predecessor, doubling its first-week sales as well as shipping 1.8m globally.

But for those retailers happiest only when calling the pint half empty there was an issue to gripe about at the end of 2004: the availability of hardware. To some extent, this has been a regular headache for console manufacturers. With only a certain monthly production capacity available through their factories, the demand at Christmas has often resulted in supply chain problems. For example, it's been an open secret since the summer that Microsoft wasn't going to be able to fulfil the demand for Xboxes in the US for this very reason. A similar situation for Sony was compounded by the popularity of the relatively new slimline PS2 redesign, the release of *GTA: San Andreas* and a mishandled price cut in the US, all of which over-fuelled demand. SCEE also claimed that a shipment of PAL PS2s was stuck in a queue somewhere outside the Suez Canal, forcing it into the expense of flying units in directly. Even in such a bizarre case, though, the lack of some consoles was a problem resulting from success. No one complained about a lack of GameCube hardware, for example.

Perhaps what will be more significant in 2005, however, is how hardware vendors marshal their inventories. It's especially relevant for Nintendo and Microsoft as they prepare to release their new hardware before Sony. The trick will be to wind down demand steadily, ensuring that this time next year they're not the ones lumbered with warehouses full of last year's unwanted Christmas presents.

INTERVIEW

For the love of games

The man behind Ape Academy explains why monkey business is the secret of a happy union

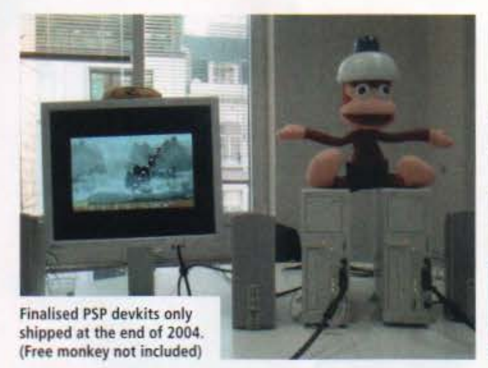
If you were asked to name the themes behind the *Ape Escape* series, you would think of pants, bananas and machine guns. A chance to discuss the apes' new PSP incarnation – minigame masterclass *Ape Academy* – with creator **Hiroyuki Kotani** reveals that there's a much more heartfelt agenda behind the game.

It seems that Sony has been encouraging PSP developers to think very hard about how people will play differently on a personal, portable console rather than on one they play at home. How did that affect the design of *Ape Academy*?
The PSP offers flexibility to play anytime, anywhere with the same spec as PS2. This title was created so people would be able to enjoy a high-quality game even if they haven't got much time to play. In addition, many male gamers in Japan tend to be troubled by their girlfriends because they get too involved in games. The theme of the game was to make a title that helps increase the communication between them and their girlfriends.

What inspired you to make games that let two people play on one PSP?
In the past, I have experienced times when I've been irritated at not being able to hold my girlfriend's hand. One PSP held by two people can not only shorten the distance between the two but will also shorten the distance of their feelings. I would like to devote this game to guys out there in the world with pure hearts like me – who can't hold their girlfriends' hands.

What have you enjoyed most about designing for the PSP?
The most thrilling experience of my life was in the last month before the release of this title in Japan when I worked all day and night, without any rest or sleep, without leaving the office at all! But seriously, I am very honoured to have been able to take part in this project for hardware of the highest spec ever, and the unknown possibilities that it has, and to make the best of the portability of PSP. (Although my girlfriend almost dumped me for it!)


Ape Academy's minigames have a number of different guises, calling on you to 'olé!' passing bulls, as well as guarding giant bananas and running very, very, very short races


Finalised PSP devkits only shipped at the end of 2004. (Free monkey not included)




Sharing a PSP between two frantic players is a preposterously perfect way to play simian air hockey on the move

In recent years games have become very focused on being like films or like real life. Do you think there's a new trend for games which are just 'pure' videogames?
I believe entertainment will break up into pieces as it broadens. Many Japanese enjoy 'pure' games on their mobile phones. At the same time, many enjoy games that are more like movies on their PS2 at home. But don't forget the time with your girlfriend! Games are necessary to keep the 'pure' feeling within yourself, like how you felt when you met your girlfriend for the first time.

How much of the PSP's potential do you think *Ape Academy* uses?
I am not sure how much of the PSP's potential was used, but there is a lot of flexibility of the concept. With *Ape Academy*, the gameplay is the key focus, not the graphics, but it is a lot of fun – it's humorous just by looking at it. It can be enjoyed with one player or two, and offers battle mode using the 'ad hoc' wireless function. The greatest potential, as far as the team is concerned, is the fun it can offer to many gamers. Please play this game with your girlfriend!



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Modesty is one of the most becoming virtues, and we would hate you to think there was anything self serving in encouraging you to head for our relaunched website this month. It's just that you might not have already read the news story (p19) explaining that this is the place to come to keep updated on the world of videogame culture in general and Edge in particular. So we're not pointing you towards www.edge-online.com because we think it's the best website you'll see all month. Absolutely not. We're pointing you there because we know that Edge Online will lead you on to dozens of other interesting sites, stories and curios and all without having to wait for the next issue of the finest games magazine in the world. Modestly speaking, of course.

Site: Edge Online
URL: www.edge-online.com





"We're very much aware of the need to balance between innovation in architecture and the ability to leverage that innovation... The learning curve for this platform should be significantly better than previous ones."
IBM researcher and Cell chip developer H Peter Hofstee talks future PS3 coders down from the precipice

"Because let's be honest here: as far as a completely immersive and cinematic experience, we were never going to top *Doom 3* anyway, and we all knew that."
Doom film scriptwriter Dave Callaham aims low

"I expect that if we're blessed enough to see it through that there'll be quite a few senators and congressmen who'll be really pissed off."
Lorne Lanning suggests Oddworld Inhabitants' next title, *Citizen Siege*, will provide a really vitriolic **Edge** interview

Newswire

Ubisoft cries liberte over EA bid

Electronic Arts' recent spate of outright acquisitions took a turn to 'investment' in late December as it announced its intent to purchase a 19.9 per cent stake in Ubisoft. Though not enough to give the superpublisher a controlling stake in Ubisoft, the European publisher responded with a statement that it considered EA's purchase as 'hostile'.

The French media has suggested that both the French government and fellow French-headquartered publisher Vivendi were in talks to defend Ubisoft against a takeover, though Vivendi declined to comment on this report. In a further show of French solidarity, Atari/Infogrames CEO Bruno Bonnell also stated in a Reuters interview that his company would be willing to aid Ubisoft if requested.

Ubisoft share prices have risen with each new development, rumour or not, in anticipation of a bidding war between the European publishers and EA. Meanwhile, EA's other troubled European buyout, a 90 per cent share acquisition of Swedish *RalliSport* and *Battlefield* developer Digital Illusions CE, remains uncertain after a revolt by two groups of shareholders.



INTERVIEW

Rub is in the air

A tired and worried Yuji Naka (right) tells us about the release of Project Rub and his plans for the future

The stylisation of *Project Rub* made it one of the most eye-catching DS titles, even Sega titles, of recent memory. How did that develop?

Because the DS has a touchscreen, you can also rub it. Well, in Japanese L and R sound exactly the same: 'rub' also sounds like 'love'. So we decided *Project Rub* would be a love story, especially since Nintendo said they wanted the DS to appeal to a broad market, and love stories have that traditional appeal – in movies, for example.

In order to appeal to people who do not normally play games, as Nintendo wanted, we needed a visual design that was completely different than usual, which is what this 'psychedelic' appearance is about. Now, the silhouettes are because we didn't want to force you to have a certain girl as your love interest. You can imagine that your dream girl is inside of that silhouette.

Except, traditionally, these broadly appealing love stories haven't featured scorpion delivery vans, unicycling and circus troupes.

No, it's not really a traditional love story! But the main character is trying so hard to get this girl, which is why he joins the circus performers – it is a way of expressing how far he will go. These days I think we're losing young people in Japan: they don't think trying hard, generally speaking, is cool. So it's really important to find a way to make them feel.

Do you think that using an abstract representation to bring out these feelings is more successful than making use of a realistic representation?

I definitely think there is more connection. These days, developers have to make their games realistic to demonstrate the hardware's power. But to use symbolism – like we used to – brings the game closer to the player, and the fun is more pure. The more realistic you make the game, the more you can lose the player's imagination, and then they start noticing all these aspects they don't like.

I'm not saying this is always the case, but it's the design rule I want to follow in the future. The problem is that with better hardware you're forced to make a more realistic show of the graphics, otherwise people won't be impressed by it. A game should not be afraid to be a game, but now it seems that in pursuing realism the feeling you get from playing games is changing. It's almost as if the concept behind making them has changed. And that's not always a good thing.

On that note, many gamers have been concerned that the merger with Sammy would see Sega's output forced towards a more marketable, less exuberant approach.

Actually, the Sega-Sammy merger does not have that sort of impact on development – it's quite the opposite. Because Oguchi-san used to be a developer, now he is CEO he still has that love for new approaches, for trying out new methods. So we had no problem with developing it.

This year has been really fun for me, doing *Sega Superstars*, doing *Project Rub*. The last time I remember having this much fun was with *Samba De Amigo*, and in comparison I think this has almost been better.

Were you concerned at all with how *Project Rub* would be received in the west, with its prominence as one of the first titles available for the DS?

We have always had to think about the western market with any title that we make. Any time you try a new direction, whether it is for a Japanese audience or a western one, it's worrying. And I'm very prone to worrying already! [Laughs] So yes, anything I do I'm worried about, and maybe I was a





little bit more so with this. But that didn't change the game.

What about the Maniac mode – did you consider that the west is a lot more prudish in that respect?

That was one thing I didn't worry about. Half of the *Project Rub* team is female, and during development it was the male developers who were the shy ones. They would just touch the girl's hands, whereas the women would go straight for the boobs to see the reaction. A lot of the ideas for the game came from the female designers, so I didn't think that would be a problem.

Why did you choose to develop a new title for the Nintendo DS and not the PSP? Was it a matter of preference?

Both consoles have their own personality. I felt that for DS, because what it offers is so new, I had to make something entirely new for it. For PSP…

"Sega has been famous for going too far ahead too early. If we were slower, then maybe we could have won the hardware market"

obviously we are making new games for PSP now, but I didn't feel there was that same necessity to make a completely new game, not yet. And we were also working on *Sega Superstars* at the same time, so we didn't have the resources for another original project.

Would you agree with the comments made by Satoru Iwata of Nintendo that the PSP is 'built on an old formula for success', of technology over innovation?

I think that the networking opportunities of the PSP will be interesting, but at this moment it seems like no one is ready to use them. There's nothing like Pictochat on DS, and that's the direction they should be exploring on PSP. Until then, well, I partly agree with what he has said.

So do you think the future of the new handhelds is in their communication aspects?

If people want these new features from the PSP, then yes. But I feel that most PSP users will be happy to play PS2 games, only on a handheld, whereas DS users will be more receptive to trying out new things. Of course, on a technical level it doesn't work to just port a PS2 game on to the PSP. So… we'll see how things turn out.

Online functionality looks to feature heavily in the next generation of consoles. After pioneering it with *Phantasy Star Online* on the Dreamcast, are you surprised other manufacturers have taken so long to catch up?

Sega has always been famous for going too far ahead too early. If we were a little bit slower, then maybe we could have won the hardware market. But that's what we've always, always been known for. So I'm not really surprised that it has taken so long. And as I've been doing online things for all these years now, I was ready to try something different. That's one reason *Project Rub* has been so fun for me.

The things about online that we… suffered [laughs], the hacking, bad users, illegal users – in the end we really spent more time just trying to keep those things out than actually developing the game, and that's why I'm sick of online. But if hardware manufacturers can figure out a system that keeps all of that out for us, I'd love to make more. If that's not possible, it's hard to be enthusiastic about online gaming.

With the release of two new handhelds within a month of each other, and three new major platforms likely to be shown next year, how do you feel looking forward?

Tired. [Laughs] We have nine platforms to develop for, it's too much! It's exhausting. With *Puyo Pop Fever*, this year in Japan we did it across 15 different platforms as an experiment to see how many we could manage. We could do that with *Puyo Pop* because it's a small game, but anything more complicated? No chance. Ideally, I'd like less hardware. At the moment, there's no possibility to make experimental games on each different platform, and then there is the balance between the new consoles and the old – which should we develop for? It's very confusing.

Has the consolidation of Sega helped you at all in this respect?

Personally, what's changed the most is that Sonic Team is no longer a separate company. Before, I was basically the CEO of Sonic Team and I managed our money. Now that we have gone back to Sega, I still have to balance the finances, but with Sega's money, and it's not so clear how much is coming in, how much is going out. And that means I'm spending more time on the business side now. Obviously that has an effect on how we develop games.

But for Sega overall, it has been a good business decision. When the developers were separate, they made their own tools, but in the new structure we can share them, which does help.

What are your plans for the next year and the new hardware?

Well, *Sonic DS* is coming as well as another title for DS, and there will be a PSP title also. And next year, *Phantasy Star Universe* will come out, so we're really busy on that at this moment – I don't think we will have time for many other new games. I can't talk much about the details of *PSU*, but I have just been in Poland with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra for recording, which was a great feeling. We're very excited about it.



The purpose behind *Feel The Magic*'s silhouetted star may be to let players project their own personality onto the game, but the result is a title which an unusually strong visual character







EVENT

Turok: bargain hunter

Acclaim's bankruptcy sale reveals opportunities for snooping, a selection of unreleased games... and some cheap furniture

Over the years, we have had the opportunity to go 'inside' any number of world-famous developers, but never like this. Last September Acclaim filed for Chapter Seven bankruptcy, and as a result the courts were required to auction off any remaining assets to meet some of the company's $100 million debts. The sale was held in the company's vast Long Island offices, and anyone willing to pay the $500 deposit – be they investors, collectors, homeowners or perhaps something else entirely – was granted access to come in and pick Acclaim's bones clean.

And so a strange mix of people gathered at what was, whether they realised it or not, the wake of a fallen monster. Some swapped stories outside, reminiscing over cigarettes about times spent with Acclaim. "I still remember when I got that *Turok* game for Christmas," one attendee said, before taking a slow, contemplative drag. He didn't speak much after that. Some attendees claimed to have never played a videogame in their lives. Most came to buy some cheap goods to resell for a quick buck. Others were dragged along by significant others, a few seemed genuinely lost. One lady 'just wanted a couch'.

Some attendees claimed to have never played a videogame in their lives. Most came to buy some cheap goods to resell for a quick buck. One lady 'just wanted a couch'

Inside, the halls still echoed from the moment the news hit, shadows of the moment still visible in the form of half-finished drinks cans and personal belongings abandoned on employee desks. Acclaim's Long Island headquarters didn't house any game development, at least not in its latter days, so it was the desks of the surprisingly large quality assurance department on the ground floor that were left cluttered with signed Anthrax posters and photos of Sarah Michelle Geller. Beta discs of games like *The Red Star* and *Juiced* lay around, haphazardly, waiting in vain to have their bugs ironed out. THQ is publishing the latter now, but we may unfortunately never hear from the former again.

The vast financial department on the second floor was littered with halogen lamps, scruffy calculators and tomes full of the company's

The opulence of the executive offices is a stark contrast to the cramped conditions of the QA department downstairs. It's easy to imagine news of the bankruptcy sweeping from one to the other

OUT THERE

HOAX INTERVIEW SHOWS YAMAUCHI'S BALLS

It's a testimony to Hiroshi Yamauchi's steely reputation that the daft statements attributed to him in a faked interview with Wired were taken seriously by some gullible types for even a heartbeat. The 'scans' of the article, which were designed to look as though they had been pulled from an upcoming issue of the magazine, appeared on a Spanish gaming website (www.gamerah.com/noticias.php?bias=180#180) and quickly spread across the internet.

Things Yamauchi never actually said included: "I stood on my chair and said to him in English: 'Hey Ballmer, why don't you suck my yellow balls'," "Look at the PSP. It's shaped like a penis," and "Kirby now looks a bit dated and, let's be honest, homosexual." Hilarious, no? Mmm.

www.gamerah.com







Some sights at Acclaim's HQ were rare glimpses into a secret world. Others, like boxes of unsold *Turok: Rage War* carts (top), were things you could see in any game shop stock room

records: elaborate documentation of what, exactly, had gone wrong. Attempts to snoop through these were met, unsurprisingly, with threats of arrest. Investor records were preserved upstairs, where expensive antique furniture, bottles of fine wine and a concentration of security guards were the norm – a contrast to the gloom of the QA division.

By the time of its downfall, Acclaim had a tarnished reputation, dulled by its eagerness to use sex and scandal to sell low-quality games. However, picking through the detritus it left behind revealed a human side it's all too easy to forget. For all its failings, Acclaim had been an integral part of many gamers' lives and – for better or for worse – a vital piece in gaming's illogical puzzle. It's hard to imagine that anyone wanted to see it end like this.



The speed with which employees had to leave the building is clear from the number of momentos that had to be left behind

Newswire



Edge Online relaunches

On January 17 the new iteration of the Edge Online website (www.edge-online.com) went live, featuring an all-new recruitment section, downloads of articles from the print magazine, regular commentary on happenings in the videogame world and more besides.

Created by the same people who produce the magazine you hold in your hands, the website is a portal to all that we term videogame culture, and will expand and mutate in the coming months to become an essential bookmark.

INTERVIEW

Beating the jungle telegraph

The creators of the world's first bongo-driven platformer, **Takao Shimizu** (producer) and **Yoshiaki Koizumi** (game designer), talk about the ideas behind DK: Jungle Beat

J*ungle Beat* proved a surprise hit at E3. Were you surprised at how warmly the game was received?

Well, what we were trying to make and show was unprecedented gameplay, so I can't imagine how this type of interface was foreseen by the visitors. However, we believe that this game would be pretty much fun for anybody to play with, so that the warm acceptance it received was something which we were very delighted about.

Why are there suddenly so many Donkey Kong games? Was there a deliberate decision inside Nintendo to try to raise his profile, or is it just coincidence?

Just a few years ago we had a 20-year anniversary of Donkey Kong, the original *Donkey Kong* game, but we really didn't do anything about it. A little later, Mr Miyamoto approached us and said that we should have done something, that we should have celebrated Donkey Kong. He didn't make any request to us to make any specific games, but I believe he was taking an opportunity to say to us all that we should have made something to celebrate this anniversary. Now, we happened to be starting to make the action game based upon Donkey Kong already at that time, but I believe that other people were encouraged to feature him in their games. So I think it was a partial coincidence and partial intention on the part of Mr Miyamoto.

How did the idea come about to display Donkey Kong at the front of the screen?

Our objective was to use the bongos to produce simple control in the style of a 2D game. So in order to make that work, we needed to show where the player is heading, what's above and ahead of him, what objects there are to get rid of. But if you are going to do that, naturally your player character becomes smaller and smaller.

"In other games which use the bongo controller, you have to move to the rhythm provided by software. In *Jungle Beat*, you create your own sound by moving the character"

That's kind of a shame, because Donkey Kong has a very rich range of expressions and he wants to show off his hot, cool moves. So in order to establish both these things, we incorporated this style of presentation.



The usual presentation of *Jungle Beat* means that Kong is a tiny figure in the centre of the screen. Duplicating him at the front of the screen conveys the full force of his punchy personality

How difficult was it to design the sound effects of the game, since the players are making their own?

That's a very good question because music and sounds are a part of the whole game experience. We had to resolve many issues in order to come up with very good solutions in the end. In other games which use the bongo controller, you have to move to the rhythm provided by software. In *Jungle Beat*, you create your own sound by moving the character. In other words, the sounds are generated as a result of your moving the character, and that's not all – the music is generated to fit round the player, to excite them as they play.

When you decided to make a game using the bongos, were there other prototypes that you rejected?

We tried some more complicated things. As you know, the bongos can capture sound through their microphone. So technically speaking it is possible that you can use the volume of sound to control how high Donkey Kong jumps. We tried it, but it was rather difficult to gauge how high you wanted him to jump, so in the end we have abandoned that idea.

And how do you see people playing the game? Is it something people enjoy on their own, or best played in a group?

We really don't have the so-called independent multiplayer mode for *Jungle Beat*, but I believe that the game can be enjoyed by a group of people enjoying together. Since the bongo controller includes the microphone for when one player is playing, others like parents, friends or lovers can help him by clapping their hands.

OUT THERE



FLASH BANG FOLLOW-UP

Jakub Dvorský, best known for his gorgeous Flash game *Samorost*, has recently returned again with some new works. Earlier in 2004, glee-club rockers The Polyphonic Spree recruited Dvorský to create a promotional game for their latest album Together We're Heavy. Though a bit shorter, all of the elements that made *Samorost* so compelling were intact, further bolstering hopes that we'll see something more feature length from him in our lifetimes. All of his works can be seen on his website, including his ill-conceived ad piece for Nike, about which we can only say we hope he was paid handsomely.

• www.amanitadesign.com



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades continues his next-gen push

At the end of *Kung Fu Chaos*, and out of the blue, our team pitched in so that Nina, Mike and I could go out and enjoy a lovely meal in appreciation of our contribution. Now, late in 2004, those days seemed far, far away.

Not everyone likes change and some people really, really hate it. And we were about to face the biggest change in game development since we went from 2D to 3D.

What if the basic tools you have been using for 10+ years, like Maya, are no longer up to the job?

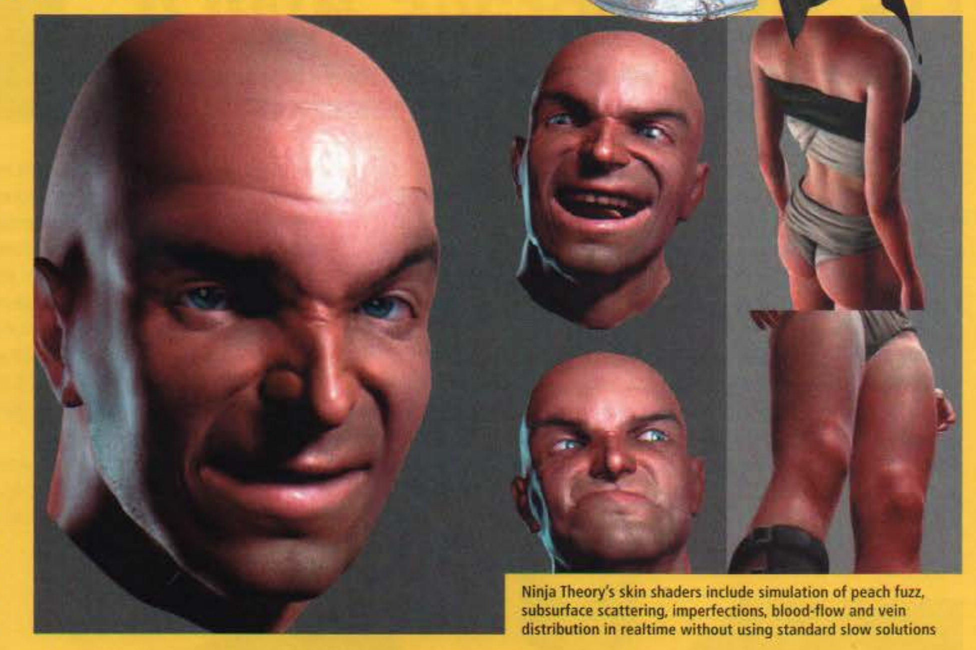
What happens when you set sky-high standards for the team that are entirely speculative?

Or when you ask team members whose last game was an irreverent kung-fu parody to switch to something serious and 'realistic'?

And what do you do when the standards of work required reach levels that are beyond the abilities of someone on your team?

I could list a hundred more issues like the ones above. The sum of them, I feel, means that this

This transition to next-gen is the hardest one yet. I remember when moving to a next-gen platform would be a thrilling and exciting proposition for everyone



Ninja Theory's skin shaders include simulation of peach fuzz, subsurface scattering, imperfections, blood-flow and vein distribution in realtime without using standard slow solutions

transition to next-gen is the hardest one yet. I remember when moving to a next-gen platform would be a thrilling and exciting proposition for everyone. Goodbye, good old days!

You have a transition here that is much more about people than the technical, creative and work-flow challenges. When change comes, some people get unhappy. One or two unhappy people can spread their unhappiness until everyone becomes unhappy.

People tried to make it work and to generally accommodate our unhappiest people in an attempt to make them happy again. And in all instances it did nothing but prolong the agony for everyone.

The fact is that someone who wants to make a cartoony game will never be happy making a realistic one regardless of the reasons behind the decision. Someone who was hired for their skills in a specific style of game may not be suited for a completely different style of game. I made mistakes, too. Some of the formal processes I introduced designed to allow the team to scale up to a much larger one created lots of dependencies and stifled the more creative processes that allow small teams to achieve big things.

Company meetings were punctuated by people unhappy about this, that and the other. Achievements were belittled at every turn and it was so unfair to the people who did so much to make things work. To compound this, there was so much up-front investment in technology that there was no visible progress apparent for months. It was a real low point for everyone.

In the end, we stopped trying to make unhappy people happy and let them leave. This would either rip us apart or make us stronger. And leave they did. One person left, then another, then another. It's horrible to see people you have worked with for so long leave but we had to let them. Over the course of the first nine months of *Heavenly Sword* we must have lost more of our staff than we had in the previous three years. And you know what? It wasn't the end of the world.

We luckily managed to find really great people to fill in the holes and pick up the pieces. Our leads stayed true and professional throughout and kept the train from derailing. Other team members took on extra responsibility and kept the momentum going.

Slowly, the mood started to change. It took a long time but we hit our stride again. The team was working as a unit and ambition and cooperation were coming back to the fore again. It's a credit to the team that they were able to overcome the many low points and make us stronger than ever before.

We pressed on with the prototype. So many areas were being worked on at once but nothing was working together. 2004 arrived. We booked our flights and publisher meetings for the Game Developers Conference in March. We simply had to get the prototype working before then and it had to be spectacularly good.

Finally, we got a build that ran smoothly and was stable. It took 23 people nine months to create. But was it good enough? Does it look next-gen? Does it play well enough? How will publishers react? Well, I was about to find out.

We borrowed a small PC, stuffed it with the fastest kit we could get our hands on, overclocked the processor and boarded our flight to the States. I'm not superstitious, but boy was I touching wood everywhere I went!

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Progress Quest

www.progressquest.com

Progress Quest may just be the ultimate MMOG. With an epic plot spanning dozens of chapters, a dazzling variety of character types, a complex system of spell and special attack upgrades and a lively community with a wide choice of guilds, you could hardly be better set.

Written by a singularly small team, *PQ* demonstrates a more comprehensive grasp of the essential dynamics of the RPG than even the very finest examples produced by legends like Square or BioWare. It's hard to describe the feeling of nonchalant triumph as your character makes his way back to town and sells off his booty. Even better, despite its almost universal appeal, *PQ* isn't a life-swallower, allowing you to multitask and even get some sleep while your character's heroics continue. All this, and it's entirely free.

Longterm *PQ*ers may have a bit of a headstart on you, but thanks to its unique gameplay it should be no effort at all to catch them up. Give it a few months and you might even scale the heights of our Talking Pony Tickle-Mimic.

EVENT

US PSP details AWOL

Fear of launching in Las Vegas as Sony Computer Entertainment America's PSP event leaves most questions unanswered

SCEA's show was not actually part of CES – avoiding having to share schedule space with Microsoft – but capitalised on the attendant crowds

In an event that was characteristic of the generally underwhelming 2005 Consumer Electronics Show running nearby, Sony's North American PSP press conference, held on January 5, was heavy on fighting rhetoric – including SCEA president **Kaz Hirai**'s proclamation that "Sony will elevate portable entertainment out of the handheld gaming ghetto" – but light on concrete details.

Despite the expectation that the system's launch date and price would be announced at the slickly produced Hard Rock Hotel showing, SCEA seemed to follow its parent company's TGS 2004 showing to the letter, with neither subject addressed. While the probability of a March launch was alluded to, there were no details on how closely the US PSP pricing would mirror the aggressive nature of the Japanese plan.

Software announcements were equally sparse, with no new firstparty titles shown other than beta code of SCEJ's *Ape Escape* platformer. It seems the US launch will be bolstered by Japanese and European titles, with *Ridge Racers* and *Wipeout Pure* shown prominently to positive reception, and commitment from Capcom and Konami to localise two games reviewed this issue – *Metal Gear Acid*, *Vampire Chronicle* (confusingly still under its original title, rather than *Darkstalkers 3*) – and firstperson shooter *Coded Arms*.

However, Sony Online Entertainment took the opportunity to unveil a new PSP franchise, *Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade* – a multiplayer hack-and-slasher using Snowblind's *Champions Of Norrath* engine, but developed internally at SOE. Set to be available at the console's launch, it's a promising original title, if one with an instantly familiar set-up.

Electronic Arts' software announcements at a follow-up event on January 6 were also overfamiliar, but the quantity showed that the company's interest in the machine had been piqued: six PSP projects were shown, with *Need For Speed Underground Rivals* joined by sports titles *FIFA Football*, *MVP Baseball*, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, *NBA Street: Showdown* (working title) and *NFL Street 2: Unleashed*.

Continue

Eight-DS jams
Band Brothers' party-game longevity grows

Christmas in games
All over now, but did you see *WOW*'s Santa Claus?

Our Christmas gifts
Thanks to everyone who sent us piles of presents

Quit

The wiping obsession
PSP's screen brings with it an urge to keep it sparkly

Corrupted save files
That's 75 hours' worth of *San Andreas* gone, then

Greg Howson
Call us and we'll give you some importers' numbers

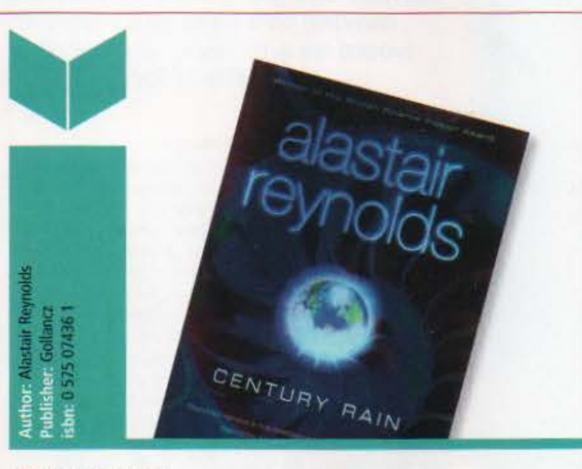


Author: Neal Stephenson
Publisher: William Heinemann
isbn: 0 434 01177 0

THE SYSTEM OF THE WORLD

The closing third of a trilogy that attempts to make polymaths out of all of us

The third tome of Neal Stephenson's ambitious Baroque Cycle, The System Of The World brings down the curtain on his factional melodrama of modern society in the making. With a combined total of 3,000 pages, it certainly demands the audience's full attention, although that's as much an issue of what's on the pages as their sheer number. Subjects to be mastered range from puritan rebellions to the aristocratic intrigues of French court life via advances of natural philosophers and global trade. And it's the latter Stephenson concentrates on as he marshalls his favourite characters Dr Daniel Waterhouse and Sir Isaac Newton within an early 18th century London setting. Newton, as in real life, is now master of the Royal Mint. Charged with ensuring the quality of England's money, he's determined to continue his alchemical experiments and track down the source of Solomon's fabled heavy gold, too. On the other hand Waterhouse, the closest thing the series has to an uninvolved narrator (and hence completely fictional), is trying to build a Logic Mill using the selfsame gold for Peter the Great. Also introduced back to the mix is Jack, King of the Vagabonds. Under control of the French, he transmogrifies into Jack the Coiner. Out to adulterate Newton's currency, he becomes the key pawn in a power struggle between the Whigs and Tories over the royal succession. Considering such feverish activity, it's no surprise Stephenson ends up creating as many loose ends as he ties up. Like history itself, the Baroque Cycle seems to be easier to start than finish.



Author: Alastair Reynolds
Publisher: Gollancz
isbn: 0 575 07436 1

CENTURY RAIN

A sci-fi novel with possibly the most complex back-story yet to appear in this magazine

In a genre characterised either by extremes of quack-futureshock-science, gun-toting action or hardbitten crime-noir, Alastair Reynolds has made a mark, almost uniquely, as one of the recent generation of UK sci-fi writer able to pick his own way between the rival schools. Century Rain makes this distinction clear, not least thanks to the opening gambit of placing it leading characters in two separate worlds before bringing them together In a 1950s France in which Nazi expansionism was halted and repulsed, unsuccessful private detective and failing jazz player Wendell Floyd is finding life tough. The clubs are closing down, his girlfriend is heading of to seek success in LA and his only case seems to be suicide. His day would be really ruined, though, if he knew his world was a quantum snapshot of a 1930s Earth set in motion by a faction of 24th century humans. Located at the end of a series of unstable wormholes and contained by a huge physical shell, Floyd's Earth-copy has become a tactical ruse in the wider conflict between the survivors of the earth, previously destroyed by nanotechnology gone wild. This denouement comes with the arrival c Verity Auger. An archaeologist from another human faction, her mission is to recover vital clues lost by the murder of an agent; the very suicide Floyd is investigating. It all makes for a surprisingly subtle tale. And ever if Reynolds doesn't manage to maintain high standards throughout – the ending will be a little Hollywood for some tastes – Century Rain demonstrates the growing maturity of his talent.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Phantom Dust

FORMAT: XBOX
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO
EXPECTED: 2005



In lieu of Microsoft bringing MS Japan's acclaimed online psychic brawler to the west, Majesco have signed it up – which should hopefully bump the game's Live population into triple digits

Champions: Return To Arms

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
EXPECTED: Q1 2005



Just as Snowblind's *Champions Of Norrath* follow-up looks to improve on the original's flaws, Ubi is also improving on the localisation time, with a near-simultaneous PAL release

Dance Dance Revolution With Mario

FORMAT: GC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: JUNE 2005



Mario, you just keep unfolding like a flower. The plumber of many talents breaks into the *DDR* scene in a Konami/Nintendo collaboration featuring both mat-thumping and new minigames

Raiden 3

FORMAT: ARCADE
PUBLISHER: TAITO
EXPECTED: 2005



A new, polygonal instalment of Seibu Kaihatsu's venerable shooter begins the year's Type-X shooter flood. We're not convinced green's a good look for the Toothpaste Laser, though

Stella Deus: The Gate Of Eternity

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA
EXPECTED: Q2 2005



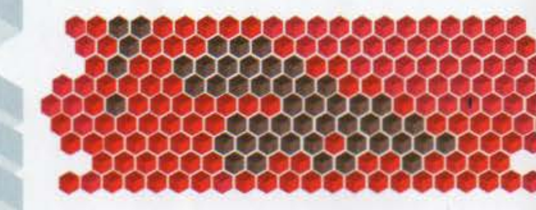
Atlus' sprawling, all-star development team's strategy-RPG is confirmed for an American release, hopefully with a localisation that does better justice to its script than the off-the-peg subtitle

Pokémon

FORMAT: GC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
EXPECTED: 2005

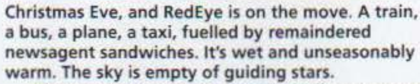


From *Pokémon Colosseum* creator Genius Sonority comes a 'true' *Pokémon* for GameCube, with an original storyline, cast, and new pocket monsters to catch in addition to the old guard



REDEYE IS...

Watching you



Christmas Eve, and RedEye is on the move. A train, a bus, a plane, a taxi, fuelled by remaindered newsagent sandwiches. It's wet and unseasonably warm. The sky is empty of guiding stars.

The gentleman sitting opposite pulls out a copy of **Edge**; RedEye flicks into David Attenborough mode, ready to observe. He flicks through it savagely, eyes darting from headline to screenshot, from screenshot to score. Five minutes and he's done, magazine shoved back in bag, arms clamped back around chest. It's hard to stifle a shout. Every word, every number, every screenshot he's just ignored is the result of a huge chain of effort and creation: game designers, artists, coders, publishers, journalists, more artists, printers. Some deserve more credit than others, no question, but watching it consumed with such uncaring nonchalance is enough to make even the most bilious blood boil.

Air rage isn't an option, not on a full stomach of cold, damp bread, so settle instead for reflection. This is what consumers do. Consumers don't give a damn about how much work went into something, the marriages it wrecked or spines it twisted. Consumers care about how much they like what they get.

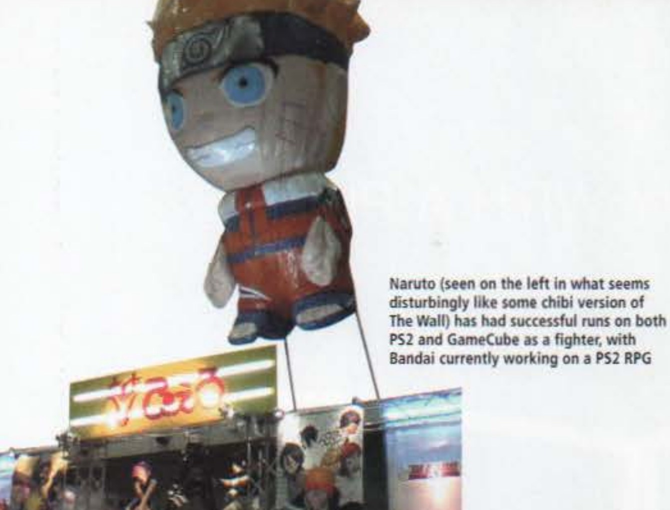
The picture's no prettier the other way up. Christmas is supposed to be the time when retailers woo consumers with the devotion of an internet stalker. This year, they've fallen out of love. RedEye only geared up for Christmas this morning, and already it's over – decorations stripped from shops, January sales tat dumped over displays of drooping Santas. Even the real spirit of Christmas, the desperate commercial avarice of last-minute shopping, is broken and bankrupt.

Touchdown, and the endless trudge before the endless wait for luggage. As RedEye lets himself be hypnotised, a buzz spreads round the carousel. We are, it seems, in the presence of celebrity. Standing away from the crowd, oblivious to the attention, are Archie and Mrs McCreadie, stars of the gruesomely twee Balamory. Within seconds, the song spreads like a virus until the whole crowd – parents, toddlers, grannies – is united in soft harmony. "What's the story in Balamory wouldn't you like to know? What's the story in Balamory wouldn't you like to know?" Archie looks round. Everyone is beaming. He beams back. Creator meets consumer. Balance is restored.

This is how it's supposed to be. Consumers want to gorge themselves on what they like and spit out what they don't. Creators want to be judged on what they make, not on what they had to cope with to make it. They shouldn't care about each other, only about the thing that's made. You don't love the staff at Bungie. You don't even know them. But you do love *Halo*, and so do they.

Outside, the queue for taxis stretches to departures. RedEye joins it behind a familiar face, now buried in his magazine. "Merry Christmas!" offers RedEye as he passes. The man doesn't look up.

*Redeye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with those of **Edge** magazine*



Naruto (seen on the left in what seems disturbingly like some chibi version of The Wall) has had successful runs on both PS2 and GameCube as a fighter, with Bandai currently working on a PS2 RPG



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Manga, magazines and marketing

Producer/director Brick Bardo on the importance of all three...



I recently visited the Jump Festa 2005, which took place at the Makuhari Messe Convention Centre on the outskirts of Tokyo. What's that? You have no idea about what I'm talking about? OK, I'll explain. Jump Festa is an event organised by Weekly Shonen Jump, which is a Japanese icon – the biggest magazine in Japan, no less – published by the Shueisha publishing company. It is about manga and has enormous importance in this country.

Perhaps if I give you a few names it's associated with it'll make its importance clearer to you: Dragon Ball, Captain Tsubasa, Saint Saya, Cobra, Kinnnikuman, Cat's Eye, Fist of the North Star, Yuyu Hakusho, Yu-Gi-Oh... Do I need to continue? I guess now you understand that all the major mangas in Japan are published in Weekly Shonen Jump, before they are released as books. All these legendary names made their debuts in this legendary magazine. It is incredibly popular – I can give you some figures that will give you an idea: in 1990, it published 6.5m copies per week! But this was at its peak and now the figures are less impressive – around half. But that is still 3.2m a week! Not bad. You also have to know that, on average, three times more people actually read the mag, because when one buys it, another two will read it as well. The mathematics speak for themselves: there are no less than 10m readers throughout Japan each week. Incredible, isn't it?

Dragon Ball, Captain Tsubasa, Saint Saya, Cobra, Kinnnikuman, Cat's Eye, Fist O The North Star, Yuyu Hakusho, Yu-Gi-Oh... All the major mangas in Japan are published in Weekly Shonen Jump before they are released as books

But there is a reason behind such a huge success, and it is no secret. In addition to charismatic mangas, they have damn good marketing: inside every issue of the magazine is a card; filling it in with your details and sending it off will reward you with a free gift. This card is a formidable marketing tool which gives a lot of information about the audience – thanks to the feedback readers write on the cards, the magazine knows exactly the level of popularity for each manga, week by week. So, if one manga loses its momentum or simply fails to appeal to the public one week, it will be dropped automatically from the magazine. Equally, should a manga be a hit, it will appear every week in the magazine. The artist responsible cannot refuse, even if he or she would like to end the series – it has to continue, no matter what (well, almost).

Another reason for the success is the way media are mixed together. When a pilot for a manga becomes a hit, it is promoted through events. If the promotional campaign proves effective, the manga is then adapted for television, videogames and other goods. In the meantime, th info being fed back to the publisher via cards is used in order to decide how a synergy can be created with the entire collection of Jump-labeled magazines in a sort of cross-marketing strategy. Weekly Shonen Jump is not Shueisha's only magazine; it also has, for example, another very popular magazine called V-Jump, which mixes videogames and mangas. Whereas in Weekly Shonen Jump the focus is on the manga first and then the game, V-Jump will focus first on the gam



Sony internal teams are currently working on two Bleach (below) titles: a one-on-one fighter for PSP and a thirdperson action game for PS2, both with attractive cel-shaded presentation

but mention the manga and other goods as well. The result is a synergy which works well, meaning that every avenue is marketed brilliantly. Other publishing companies could do the same – and they've tried – but Shueisha has been able to keep its leading position.

So, yes, back to the Jump Festa! This is a show that gathers all manga fans. They have tons of stuff to enjoy: appearances by some of the manga creators, talks with animation voiceover people, mini live concerts, game tournaments and a massive amount of goods to purchase. The show is also attended by many companies from various industries, including animation and, of course, videogames.

With the Yu-Gi-Oh fever now passed, many companies are searching for the next big licence. Of course, such a big licence doesn't appear every day, but every company has the same dream and keeps searching. This year, the big licence is certainly Bleach. The animation series started on television last October; it's about the fights and adventures of a young boy who's capable of seeing ghosts. Many think that it's going to become bigger than Dragon Ball or Yu-Gi-Oh, and its publisher, Shueisha, and the companies that have secured the licence, are putting all their efforts into promoting it. SCE has secured the licence for PS2 and PSP, Sega Sammy for the GBA and Bandai for trading cards. Together, they're making Bleach a big name in gaming here.

On the show floor, you could find all of Japan's biggest gaming names – Bandai, Konami, Square Enix, Sega Sammy, Hudson, SCE, Nintendo, etc – but to have a presence you needed to be a sponsor of animation on TV. For small or even medium-sized games companies, this is a difficult investment to make. However, it's as if the content at Jump Festa has some kind of magical attraction to game publishers, as many are ready to support even heavy financial investments to convert them into videogames.

I've often heard in the west that 'the Japanese game market is difficult' – that games that are selling millions of copies in Europe and the US are shifting only a few thousand in Japan. Many times I've been approached with western titles and an invitation: "Would you be interested in localising this title for Japan?" To be honest, none had the potential to sell in Japan. It's not a question of bad gameplay or concept, it's more about character design which really does not fit with the audience. (Maybe this isn't the only reason, of course, but it's an important one.) If you are making a game and would like to sell it here in Japan, I would have just one piece of advice: it's maybe time you started reading Weekly Shonen Jump magazine. But don't try too hard. I mean, we already have enough competition among Japanese game makers!

A selection from Shonen Jump's manga empire: western comic-to-game franchising may never be handled with this kind of singleminded industry

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

God Of War



David Jaffe's astonishingly violent riff on Grecian myth shows more brutal promise each time we see it, seeming to pull as few punches with substance as it does with style
PS2, SCEA

World Of WarCraft



The European beta is drawing to a close, but not before our Christmas 'break' was sucked up into 16-hour days of revenging dead gnomes and building mechanical squirrels
PC, VIVENDI

The Red Star



It should have been a Most Played regular by now. But we haven't lost hope yet that the best title Acclaim never published will still find a well-deserved commercial release
PS2, XBOX, PUBLISHER TBA

The generation game
To develop in interesting times



For games developers, it's a case of being careful what they wish for with new hardware, as it just might just all show up at E3

Yuji Naka is exhausted. It's not just the jet-lag, or a hectic 2004 at the head of a multiplatform development studio: it's exhaustion in expectation of the year to come. Two new handhelds and three new consoles, all heavily in mind if not yet in living rooms. In the period where this generation tails off and the next begins there will be ten major platforms – the PC, two Xboxes, three PlayStations, four Nintendo consoles – vying for a thirdparty developer's attention, as well as an increasingly sophisticated mobile gaming market growing out there on the sidelines.

That prospect must temper the thrill of the new with a thrill of horror deeper than a multiplatform gamer's realisation of their monthly spending total. With the considerations of longer development periods for more complex titles to match to sympathetic architecture (and sympathetic audiences), producing absolute innovation as well must seem like a sheet of corrugated iron to crown a house of cards.

Ten platforms in two tenses: does a developer look to future hardware and hope to work *Halo* magic at launch, or to the incumbent formats for a latter-day miracle the likes of *Resident Evil 4*, *Wanda And Colossus* or *Stranger's Wrath*? The former risks the caprices of impatient early adopters – willing to abandon a machine far before the software can prove its potential – and the latter the threat of being shuffled out of the spotlight as the cycle ends.

But for the best developers, these are their kind of odds: the sleep-depriving, relationship-threatening storm before the calm of that gold master that can produce the kinds of games you hadn't thought possible this generation or the next. 2005 will be a good year for hype – and a good year for Hype. An Indian summer for this generation's hardware, an indication of what will define and constrain the output of some very different approaches to handheld gaming, and the first great outstretched toe-dips into gaming's three biggest sequels yet. And, we hope, the opportunity for Naka-san and weary developers everywhere to book some holiday time.





FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

Battlefield 2

A new mode should augment the original's wonderful blend of tactics and mayhem. But will the 1942 faithful love it, or is mutiny afoot?

We're in a typically plush EA 'media centre' at its head offices in Chertsey, and a throng of journalists has the choice of asking questions or getting on with a day's playtesting of DICE's *Battlefield 2*. Stupid question. The walk/half-run hurry to the PCs is something to behold, but then this is the sequel to one of the most-played online games ever.

The name may have been stripped of any fancy sub-titles or dates but the game itself is almost entirely new. At least in terms of technology. Indeed, the no-nonsense moniker reflects *Battlefield*'s popularity – after all, why restrict yourself to one war when you can throw in tanks, jets, APCs, guns and gadgets that cover several decades of modern warfare? The buoyant *Battlefield* mod community will see to those specific wars in any case.

Judging from the pre-alpha code, the non-specificity has done the brand no harm whatsoever. What you get instead is the choice of joining one of three armies – the Chinese, the US or the Russians – to fight in fictional conflicts across the globe. Twelve maps will ship with the boxed copy, and a singleplayer bot-populated campaign is supported, but it's really only thrown in for honing your skills for the 'real' thing – those epic 64-player online skirmishes. DICE dabbled with the idea of bumping it up to 100, but felt the performance hit for most users wasn't worth the effort.

After all, why restrict yourself to one war when you can throw in tanks, jets, APCs, guns and gadgets that cover several decades of modern warfare?



Along with a major graphical, physics and engine overhaul, *Battlefield 2* introduces a new Commander mode to increase tactical options and encourage a more considered approach to warfare. In essence, one player on the team is given privileged access to a set of commands to help plan a concerted team attack, though whether individuals want to take these orders is quite another matter. The commander can view a detailed overhead map, zoom into specific areas, scan for enemies, launch artillery strikes, drop supply boxes, spot and fix enemy vehicles and lay down waypoints and spawn points. Taking on the commander mantle is clearly a huge responsibility, but troops can launch a mutiny if they feel let down by their leader. If only one player wants to be commander then the role automatically transfers; if several go for the top job then the player with the highest rank gets the promotion.

Persistence is also a new theme, and medals and scores accumulated during a game remain with your character. Ranked servers will sort the soldiers out from the







There's a pleasing mixture of urban, military, wetland and forest environments to wage war in. Many of the buildings in urban locations can now be entered, and house sieges are as tense as you would imagine









Commanders get a bird's eye view of the battlefield and can even drop supply boxes on enemies – a direct hit with one will notch up an instant kill. C4 charges can also be attached to enemies with devastating effect

civvies and any antisocial behaviour during games will result in scores plummeting.

It's noticeable that the medic and engineer roles are more rewarding due to a new area of effect design feature. Climb inside an APC and nearby players can be healed or vehicles repaired without you having to get out again. As a medic it's possible to trundle around as a kind of mobile infirmary or get out and shock an enemy to death with your defibrillator paddles. Two new player kits have been added: Spec-ops and Support, the former providing the player with a range of anti-personnel gadgets, the latter a heavy machine gun plus extra ammo to distribute to teammates.

The game comes with voiceover-IP as standard, so plugging in a pair of headphones and a mic gets you communicating with your squadmates instantly. Other improvements include a sprint command (though it's disappointing to discover that you can't look around while running away from danger), a much faster framerate (in the region of 50-plus) and the amphibious nature of APCs.

Thankfully, *Battlefield 2* retains all the drama and intensity of the original, the ability to perform one-man-against-all-the-odds heroic deeds or camp on a hillside with a sniper rifle. It gives you almost limitless choice in how you want to approach the gritty, and often comical, experience of virtual war. The new Commander options give it extra steel; fighting alongside your comrades in well-organised and executed raids offers a different kind of emotional reward to the over-the-top frenzy of *1942*.

Battlefield's success is ultimately down to two things: empowerment and balance. Giving players potent toys to play with is one thing; preventing any one of those elements offering an unfair advantage is quite another. Adding fighter jets to the mix is potentially dangerous (and why isn't EA showing them in this build?). Strafing an enemy compound in an F-15 Eagle, F/A-18 Hornet or a Russian SU-34 is enticing, but relevant checks and balances will have to be made. DICE says jet speed, for instance, will be reduced to help ground troops use SAMs effectively.

But, in practice, do all these new features, war machines and tactical options improve the experience? Let's just say that Chertsey isn't the easiest place in the UK to reach by public transport, and no one was going home early...

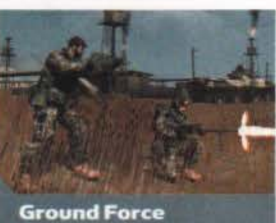




All ground vehicles are simple to control and most have two separate weapons that are engaged with either mouse button. Choppers are graceful and potent in the right hands, but do require practice to master



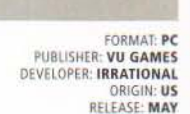
Burning wrecks will now injure soldiers if they get too close; it's a feature DICE says players have been asking for since the launch of the original *Battlefield 1942*



Ground Force

The *Battlefield 2* world is not the most picturesque on PC, but its graphical detail is now extremely high. The lush grass and rocky hills are not just visual frippery, however: they offer a level of cover that was previously to die for. Hide in gorse and you will not be given away by popping textures, and crouching is a must if you want to make yourself a harder target to both see and hit.

The introduction of ambient sound also keeps you immersed in the world, and birds and wildlife can even give your position away if disturbed.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VU GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY**

SWAT 4

Last month's superheroic studio Irrational lays down the law in a long-awaited police simulation sequel

The sole included multiplayer map in the closed beta tes is a cleverly laid-out courthouse. The police and hostage must ascend three staircases. Thoughtful terrorists will attempt to outflank the party and attack from the rear





In April 1992, at the height of the LA riots, Rodney King appeared in front of the news cameras, pleading for calm: "Can't we all get along?" A year later, the chief responsible for policing the disastrous peace appeared on the front of game boxes for *Daryl F Gates' Police Quest: SWAT*, and *Daryl F Gates' Police Quest 4: Open Season*. The point of this? Check Google. The internet doesn't remember the botched situation, or the lasting criticism of the LAPD and its eventual reforms. Instead, Gates' lasting claim to fame is as chief technical advisor to a piece of unremarkable digital entertainment. *SWAT 4*, in development at Irrational Software, needs to work hard to leave a similarly lasting impression.

This is a rigorous police simulation at heart, a firstperson shooter obsessed with the dynamics of gunplay, weapon modelling, and procedure. Your goal is to neutralise the targets: placing them under arrest, knocking them out with the Taser or stun guns, or, if all else fails, with a quiet double tap. Frighten a perp into submission and he'll proffer his wrists, ready for handcuffing. A context-sensitive interface allows players to make tactical decisions without resort to police training manuals.

The included career mode provides 12 standalone missions with no over-arching storyline or character progression. Instead, Irrational will allow players to customise the missions according to taste – a hostage here, some criminal elements there, nasty men hiding under or behind a choice of curtains and tables elsewhere.



Level design shows an impressive eye for detail. Many are urban nightmares, from Muzak-infested corporate offices to ghettos. It seems impossible, sometimes, to believe a designer placed the bricks, rather than falling into place naturally

The real highlight is set to be the multiplayer modes, and cooperative play looks like being a major draw. Up to six players can take on the same missions as in the singleplayer game, drawing enemy fire and distracting the AI to allow teammates a clear shot at the target. The online multiplayer offers a twist on an old *Counter-Strike* favourite, as one player takes on the role of hostage while the rest of the players are split into teams of police and terrorists. The police must escort the hostage to a safe zone while the terrorists attempt to capture, rather than kill, him. Once he's brought under control, however, allegiances shift. The police become the assassins, their new mission being to 'neutralise' the VIP, the use of such a clinical term masking just how riotous play then becomes. The wretched hostage is armed with nothing more than a pistol, and must rely on his captors to protect him at all costs.

It's new ideas for old forms of play. Like its work on the rejuvenation of the *Tribes* series, Irrational isn't making massive changes. But the tweaks and distinct craftsmanship are creating a better game than what existed before.

The cooperative mode will allow for improvised tactics. The idea is not to replicate police strategy entirely, but to give the player the feeling of authenticity. The slow movement speed and chilling radio squawks nail this







Movement is exceedingly slow, even with the included sprint key. Doorways become major choke-points, since there's no way to leap around the corner, spraying the room with an unofficial MP5 knockoff





Injured troopers will use medical stations autonomously in quiet periods, but never make unprompted fighting withdrawals

Star Wars: Republic Commando

Even with the benefit of some impressive antipodean drawls, this doesn't seem to be the Star Wars game we were looking for

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E141**

The trouble with *Republic Commando* has always been encapsulated in that visor. It doesn't fail to fulfill its role as HUD readout or screen furniture, but where *Metroid Prime* used one to magnify the atmosphere, *Republic Commando's* shields you from it, distancing your faceless clone trooper from his squad of faceless clone troopers and the already unengaging aesthetic of the Star Wars prequels.

It's a brave choice to cast a Star Wars game with the very kit-set hordes that exist as the backdrop for its larger-than-life heroes and villains, and *Republic Commando* doesn't show much evidence of justifying it. Each member of your four-clone squad has a personality – as assembly-line as their bodies, though it's hardly fair to complain about archetypes considering the source material – but they only amount to endlessly repeating, often ill-fitting soundbites that trail *Halo's* camaraderie (though your character fares slightly better thanks to Temuera Morrison's authoritatively clipped New Zealand vowels). In all but radio chatter, your companions are indistinguishable, which at least makes ordering them about in the heat of battle a simple matter of first come, first assigned.

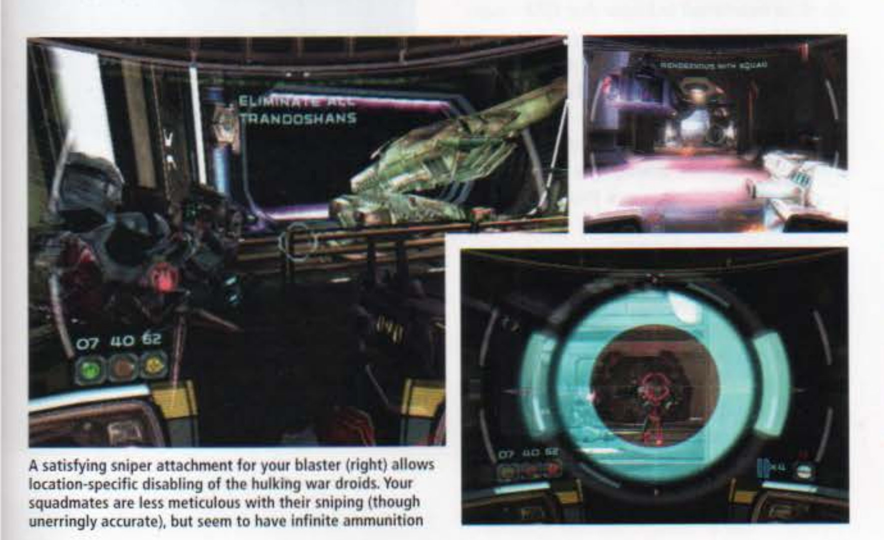
The command system remains elegant, with a single button press assigning or pulling back troopers from context-sensitive positions, but it's also beginning to feel limited. As your squad can only be ordered to take predetermined suppressing fire or sniping points, the only real skill in commanding them seems to be finding and filling those positions as quickly as possible. And though it's a satisfying spectacle when a battle plan is enacted, your squad decisively routing enemy advances with the precision their trigger-happy filmic counterparts never demonstrated, it's not *your* plan.



Your melee attack, a nasty jab with a spring-loaded wrist blade, is powerful but has the drawback of splattering your visor with ichor for a few seconds

In the best setpieces, when you're racing against time, overwhelmed by enemies and the soundtrack is swelling – when it feels like you're part of a Star Wars battle, in other words – this lack of control is less perceptible, but elsewhere it seems there's too much method and not enough madness. The solo sections should offer a break from regime, but on early evidence even these have been plotted out well in advance, with internal monologue-instructed progression and fortuitous positioning of explosive barrels.

The overall experience is reminiscent of The Phantom Menace: there's little to criticise technically, but much to lament in its vacuousness. LucasArts has mistaken formulaic heroism-by-numbers for the real thing, and the Xbox version may find itself in the position of being the lesser of two space operas, as both *Halos* are so much more convincingly sci-fi matinee in nearly every fashion. Perhaps the remaining development time can coax out the Star Wars magic, but otherwise this will be a safe, functional, unremarkable shooter: an unfortunate return to pre-*KOTOR* form.

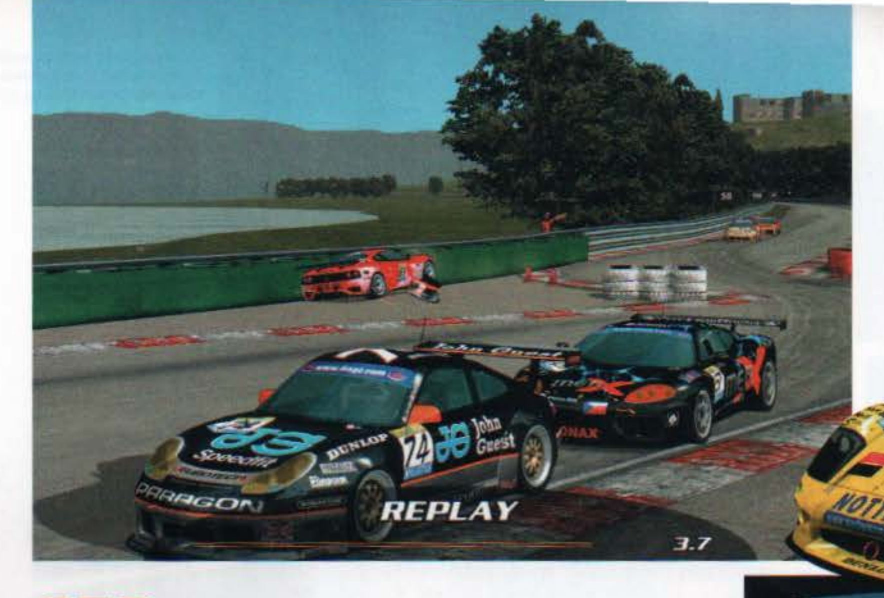


A satisfying sniper attachment for your blaster (right) allows location-specific disabling of the hulking war droids. Your squadmates are less meticulous with their sniping (though unerringly accurate), but seem to have infinite ammunition



A clone in need

Being downed on the battlefield isn't the end, provided at least one of your squad is still standing to revive you. They will attempt to clear the area of hostiles before coming to your aid, unless you order them to revive you under fire and risk losing them in the process. The anxious wait as you watch the battle play out through a red haze is, at the risk of sounding like a backhanded compliment, one of *Republic Commando's* most memorable aspects.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SIMBIN**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2005**

GTR

It's been hailed as the most realistic driving sim ever, but can SimBin deliver fun along with the authenticity?



Nut job

***GTR* is also the first racing game to take advantage of NaturalPoint's TrackIR technology. Previously used for flight sims, the device consists of a cap that changes the player's virtual viewpoint by tracking the movement of the head. Hopefully, this should give players a greater situational awareness and help with manoeuvres such as helping to defend racing lines into corners. *GTR* has already picked up several awards in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Scandinavia where it was released late last year. This international version also comes with 16 new vehicles, the ability to save mid-race and the epic 24 Hours of Spa race with a full day and night time cycle.**

The founder of the team behind *GTR*, Henrik Roos, is a three-time Swedish GT champion and still competes in the FIA GT World Championship. His intimate knowledge of the sport instantly shows. But having a racing legend (at least in his own household) heading up the project is not the only quality that makes this simulation stand out. You see, Roos knows the importance of testing. Every minute nuance of a GT car's handling is going to be replicated in the game. And he's also employed a number of the top current GT drivers to test the game alongside his own crew.

These claims of real-world physics and authentic handling are nothing new in the driving sim field, but it only takes a few moments in one of the vehicles to realise that *GTR* is a bit special. Modes go from Sunday driver though Arcade, Semi-Pro and up to Simulation. The harder the difficulty, the more driving aids you lose, but you'll also notice a sudden improvement in competitor AI. Even on Semi-Pro your rivals display a Schumacher-like determination, making overtaking an art rather than a reckless sport. Braking points must be observed or vital speed is lost and thinking a couple of corners ahead is necessary if you want to pass other cars successfully.

It's also encouraging to see AI drivers employing bullying tactics in an attempt to put you off your rhythm. Gentle nudging is commonplace, and cars darting up the inside when you control the corner can only be defended by those with a steady nerve. It's electrifying stuff because, at the highest setting, cheating and brutal behaviour is punished severely. Put one tyre on the grass and the traction you lose can be enough to spin you. Similarly, braking on gravel fails to exert any kind of bite. Just as it should be.

If this all sounds a bit too severe, then you'll be heartened to know that *GTR* never feels unfair. This is down to a superb level of consistency; once you learn the nuances of your particular vehicle, instinct takes over and it responds with a precision borne out of hundreds of hours of testing. But then there are always the driving aids for those who want to gradually work their way up to Championship standard.

As *GTR* has the full FIA licence it includes all of the cars and drivers from the 2003 season as well as the prestigious 24 Hours of Spa race. It's also strong in the audio and visual departments and particular effort has gone into recording the authentic engine noises of anything from a Lotus Elise to a Ferrari 550. It might not have the nostalgia value of *Grand Prix Legends* but *GTR* has certainly got the potential to spawn a fan community just as rich.



The cars' interiors have also been modelled and kitted out with the appropriate dials and switches. Clearly a labour of love from people nuts about the sport, *GTR* still manages to be a lot of fun despite its insistence on real-world content

Press the Escape button and you can view an instant replay. On the higher Semi-Pro and Simulation settings damage can be disastrous, though it's possible to limp to the pits for repairs





All race flags must be observed or severe penalties, including disqualification, will be administered. *GTR* also uses MOTEC, the race analysis software the real FIA teams use to improve their vehicles' performance







Races across gravel or countryside almost get the heart racing, but at the moment *Enthusia* is something of a halfway house. It doesn't have the rough and tumble of a rally game or the sliding excesses of a *Ridge Racer*

Enthusia: Professional Racing

The man behind Rage Racer takes the road less travelled and comes up with a driving sim with G-force included

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

When developers are desperate to make you see how realistic their games are they usually show screenshots of fictional things next to the authentic things. Konami has gone one step further by filming footage of real cars drifting around tracks and juxtaposing them, corner for corner, next to its own in-game footage. There's very little to choose between the representations, of course, but the spot-the-difference game gets tiresome pretty quickly.

Point made; *Enthusia* has been built not to try emulate *Gran Turismo 4*, but to do realism like no other driving game before. Its key innovation is a driving aid christened the VGS, or Virtual Gravity System. The idea is that players can use the feedback from this meter to drift and power steer around courses with greater precision. In effect, it's a visual representation of the forces that act on the vehicle, and the driver's body.

It's a nice idea in principle, but the VGS currently feels like nothing more than a distraction in the middle of your screen. It's not that the information it imparts appears inaccurate, just that it seems redundant. Take a sharp right-hand corner and the G-forces bearing in on your (virtual) head result in several chevrons poking out to the left of the VGS. The more G-force, the more chevrons. Brake violently into a corner and the chevrons shoot upwards, purportedly representing how close your head is to the windscreen. It's as gimmicky as it sounds.

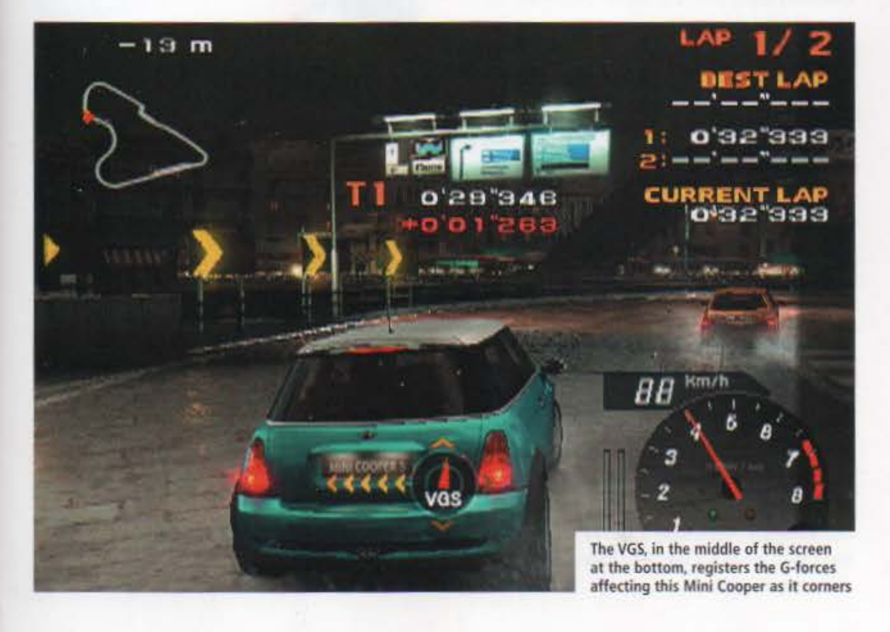
Of more practicality are the grip indicators, small representations of each tyre that communicate useful information on how much traction you're getting in and out of corners. Because each tyre is independently monitored it's possible to use this information to control drifts, take greater risks and generally drive on the ragged edge.



While it doesn't massage the eyeballs with the elegance of *GT4*, *Enthusia* does have its moments. Waterfalls, complete with splash effects, and sunlight dappling through tree branches are just a couple of visual delights

Konami's decision to release a demo with only a Free Ride mode is lamentable as it fails to show *Enthusia*'s potential. A handful of tracks and just one opponent fail to adequately showcase the love and effort from Manabu Akita, *Rage Racer*'s designer. Ironically, there's something a little dead and restrained about the racing. Vehicles currently handle like they've got invisible stabilisers attached. You want to screech into a corner and let the back end snake wildly out, but all you get is a calm drift.

The game is still very much on the garage blocks and undergoing engineering works, so hopefully *Enthusia* will lose some of its sterility before release. It has the cars, the tracks and the will to match *Gran Turismo 4*, but without any AI competition to race against it's hard to say if *Enthusia* can live up to its bold name.



The VGS, in the middle of the screen at the bottom, registers the G-forces affecting this Mini Cooper as it corners



Bump and grind

The VGS currently uses arrows as indicators, but Akita says this could be changed to another system, one that sees a ball moving from the centre of a circle to represent the G-force. The fact this hasn't been finalised adds to the feeling that the VGS is a gimmick, albeit a well-meaning one. The meter can be turned off and this helps you to concentrate and, ironically, drive better. It's a pity this level of detail hasn't extended to the crashes. It's all too easy to gain an advantage by using barriers to shave seconds off times, though bumps are reported in your end-of-race stats.



On a (literal) bright note, the skies have cleared from the intentionally oppressive poisoned haze of the original

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **CAVIA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Drag-On Dragoon 2

Cavia's pitch-black dark fantasy prepares for a second flight. Will it reach out to a larger audience this time?

Drag-On Dragoon (released here as *Drakengard*) was one of the first releases from a newlywed Square Enix, giving it a prominence it may never have attained in its earlier life as an Enix contract to a then-unknown developer. It's certainly hard to imagine Square ever lending its name to a title that so revelled in stripping away the gilded veneer of heroic fantasy to cake the player in waves of soot and blood.

Such was the excess of *Dragoon*'s overkill that the game was simply too fatiguing for some critics and players – and even its fans would admit that the hybrid of mass battle and aerial combat struggled to deliver on all it promised, if only because its themes and production design promised so much. Cavia's return to the title that trumpeted its arrival aims to make amends, though its subtitle – Love Red, Ambivalence Black – indicates it's unlikely to be by way of a happy ending. Set 18 years after the original conflict, that tale's protagonist Caim and his dragon Angelus have been forgotten after their disappearance. A new enemy threatens the world, and a new hero-and-dragon pair, Nowe and Legna, stand against it. With them is a returning figure from the first game, Manah – whose unwitting childhood role as harbinger of the apocalypse seems to have also been forgotten, or at least forgiven.

Unlike the first title, where Caim's companions could only be used for brief supporting roles in ground combat, *Dragoon 2* allows the player to switch at will between Nowe and Manah. Both characters can assemble their own unique suites of weaponry and, as in *Dragoon*, sufficiently blooding each weapon allows it to level-up. It's now possible to carry items into combat that have been purchased in towns during calmer periods – suggesting some more traditional RPG elements have made their way into the game's 'action-RPG' tag.

Dragonback combat will benefit from a new set of manoeuvres, including more air-to-ground attacks beyond the previous fireball-strafing: it's unclear whether these will be available from the outset, or will be awarded to Legna as he gains experience. Intricate aerial duels with other dragons are also promised, hopefully with a tightening of the original's airborne handling.

If Cavia can work to ensure *Dragoon 2*'s subtitle isn't a portent for the same divided audience reaction that afflicted its firstborn, it could be a brave new age for its heady mix of rewarding mechanics and alarming misanthropy. Then again, being a cult taste was always a part of *Dragoon*'s demented charm.



Both characters can use magic attacks – it's likely these are still bound to the currently equipped weapons rather than personal – but Manah's occult history makes her a more viable magic-user. A dab hand with a polearm, too



Engine improvement allows for more variation and character in ground levels than the previous plains and corridors



Bosses feature heavily, and standard encounters seem less numbers-heavy than before (with correspondingly improved model detail). The kill-chain counter remains, though, indicating there's still plenty of death to be dea

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SNK PLAYMORE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**

The King Of Fighters '94 RE-BOUT

SNK's crown Neo-Geo jewels are given a polish – and a new controller – for their jubilee showing

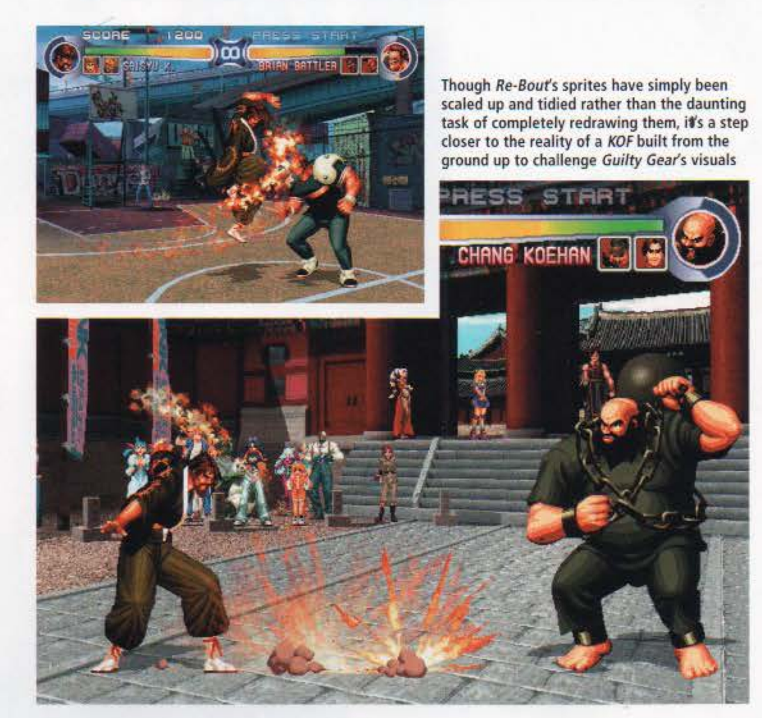
To celebrate the venerable *King Of Fighters'* tenth anniversary – and seemingly in lieu of a *KOF 2004* – SNK Playmore has re-released the very first *KOF* title with a hi-res makeover. The imposing pixels of the Neo-Geo are gone, or at least relegated to a Classic mode, replaced by resampled versions with redesigned animations and effects. Backgrounds are now 3D, with weather and time-of-day effects to match, but their technical simplicity – lagging behind the visuals of the PS2's other full 3D fighters – puts them in the shade of the more characterful 2D originals.

It's now possible to create your team from any of the available characters, a luxury previously only allowed from *KOF '95* onwards, and the Japanese release will also support online play to unite nostalgic fighters from across the country. Also making a reappearance with added features is the Neo-Geo PS2 pad, this version featuring eight buttons – the extra four (two face, two shoulder) covering the PS2's shoulder buttons. The excellent D-pad is naturally well-suited to *KOF*'s demands, and will be put through its paces by further planned PS2 releases in 2005: multi-game collections of *KOF '95-'97, KOF '98-'00* and *Last Blade 1&2*, as well as standalone releases of *Mark Of The Wolves* and *Twinkle Star Sprites*.

Any SNK fans in the statistically unlikely position of being unable to play import releases may yet see PAL versions courtesy of Ignition and SNK Playmore's ongoing publishing relationship – although the online functionality and the Neo-Geo pad could be lost in translation.



The official joypad is much like those packaged with the Neo-Geo CD, albeit with the addition of shoulder buttons

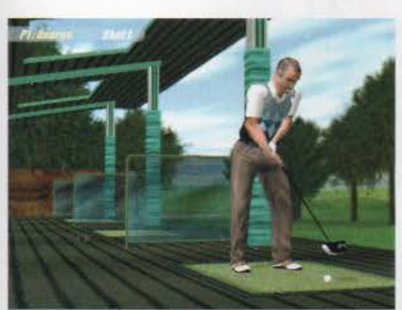


Though *Re-Bout*'s sprites have simply been scaled up and tidied rather than the daunting task of completely redrawing them, it's a step closer to the reality of a *KOF* built from the ground up to challenge *Guilty Gear*'s visuals

Gametrak: Real World Golf

What if instead of playing at playing golf you could just play it? Step forward, Aqua Pacific

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **IN2GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **AQUA PACIFIC**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2005**





There are five full 18-hole courses, each of which can be affected by different weather patterns. The game provides readouts on the angle at which you're holding your 'club', to help you pull off the perfect shot

Even if you've never played golf there are things you know. You know there's something about the knees, something about the wrists, something about the backside. *Real World Golf* takes all those instincts, clips them into the Gametrak's motion detector, and tees you off in a millimetre-perfect virtual world.

Using only movement, you navigate around the course, fly over holes (literally, arms held out Superman-style) and choose your clubs. Then you address the ball and swing. Even if you don't know how, you'll find that you know how.

The attachment that clips on to the Gametrak's cables still hasn't been finalised, but don't expect either a serious replica club or a cute plastic cartoon. It seems likely to be a neat, black stake – just enough to give your hands (and your dignity) something to grip on to.

The other slight oddity is that you're standing square-on to the screen when your avatar is side-on to the ball. Your brain quickly adjusts, however, and the swooshing satisfaction of personally powering a 300-yard drive is a profound pleasure. There are five courses included, with the usual choices of championships, quick play and even some party games.

The motion detection has so far proved extremely sound, allowing a delicacy of touch which encourages experimentation with fades and draws. Putting proves a slightly more awkward process, as it so often does in golf games, and some more extended time with the game will be needed before it's clear if it's the kind of challenge that tips into frustration.

There's no question that *Real World Golf* feels a more elaborate evolution of Gametrak software than *Dark Wind*. It still suffers in comparison – both visually and in overall scope – to something like *Tiger Woods*, but that comparison could hardly be more irrelevant. *Tiger Woods* was rightly applauded for translating the smooth precision of a golf swing into an abstract flick of the analogue stick. *Real World Golf* preserves so much more of that fluidity it makes that compromise look like a rather quaint joke.







Commentary on your shots is provided throughout by – who else? – Peter Allis

Revival

After four years and four iterations, Resident Evil 4 is just about complete. We check in at Capcom's Production Studio 4 in Osaka for a final briefing

TITLE: **RESIDENT EVIL 4**
FORMAT: **GC, PS2 (PS2 VERSION RELEASE TBA)**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 4**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US), MARCH 18 (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E135, E138, E143**



horror

It's fitting that Production Studio 4 should be playing a role in the Japanese development industry's own *Dino Crisis*: the question of whether to reinvent its most lumbering franchises or leave them fossilised. Just as Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XII* is struggling to unshackle itself from its self-made traditions, **Hiroyuki Kobayashi**'s team has sought to make *Resident Evil*'s dragging knuckles white with mortal tension again. We talked to the *RE4* producer and studio head about the long road leading to its dark woods.

How did you reach this final incarnation of the game?
It was something we had wanted to do for a long time, so we used the GameCube remakes to learn the hardware and to win us some of that time. It has been a long process, and not a smooth one either. You remember the version we presented at last year's E3, and how radically different it was from the game you see now? At that time, I thought we had something with that game, but we realised it was not bringing this revolution we were seeking so much. You can't imagine how hard we tried to find this perfect version. In addition to the 'fog' version we showed at E3 in 2003, we had additional versions we never displayed or spoke about. In fact, *Resident Evil 4* is actually the fourth version – it's a funny coincidence as it really is *RE4*. But this illustrates how much we struggled.

When was this version's design finalised?
In 2003, I think just after E3. But we didn't have anything to show, only ideas and concepts, so we had to keep showing the same video of the old version at the following TGS. It wasn't until January in 2004 that we could announce the game's new design and concept.

What do you think is the key theme?
Games like *Silent Hill* or *Fatal Frame* are very



1. There's a faint sense of MegaMan déjà vu about the entrance to Capcom's Osaka HQ. **2.** This GBA-powered Servbot clinches the deal. **3.** Banks of monitors, GC development kits and fluorescent Post-It notes outnumber staff inside Production Studio 4. **4.** Inspirational reading material ranges from artbooks to manga to idol magazines. **5.** A trophy case awaits *Resident Evil 4*'s inevitable garlands. **6.** Those late nights have obviously driven Studio 4 to the hard stuff. **7.** The imposing Osaka R&D building. **8.** A familiar marvel of Capcom engineering.


Hiroyuki Kobayashi

much about horror, and sometimes use invulnerable enemies, whereas *Resident Evil* has always let you fight and defeat enemies to provide satisfaction. *RE4* is taking that to a new level by being much more action-oriented. In a standard *RE* game, you had this exploration and puzzle-solving process, but this time, they are almost gone – this game is damn fast. Previously, you opened a door, had a look in the room and eventually heard the zombie coming and had plenty of time to get your weapon, aim at your enemy and defeat it. This time, it comes in a flash, and you will not have time to rest as the enemy is really coming from all directions. In a way you could be exhausted by the game's tempo, which is why we decided to divide the game into chapters to let users rest and return later. There are also various continue spots to restart from when you die.

Is there a concern that series fans may not appreciate this change in rhythm?
If we had kept the same formula, it would face a shrinking audience. People would say: 'The environment is different, but we have to do the same thing', or: 'Zombie-like enemies again?' This is a pattern that's bound to fail in the end. Now, there are fans that love this old style, but changes are needed. We included sufficient elements to answer the core fans' expectations, but we had to appeal to the people who left the series after the first or second version. I would like *RE4* to be a reason for them to return, and for others to experience it for the first time.

Are you reacting to the current state of the survival horror genre?
I think it's not a genre with much room to change. I mean, it will keep developing itself, but inside the boundaries set at its creation.

After moving so far from the established *Resident Evil* structure, did you consider changing the game's title?
Well, I really think it is still a true *RE*. It shares the same DNA as the series. But even within the development team, there have been suggestions that we change the name. As you know, we had in the past made a game that moved so far away from the series that we needed to change the name, with *Devil May Cry*.

"It is a different kind of tension: the expectation of attack from anywhere. You have almost no safe spots, no walls to protect you from an attack from behind"

DMC still retained the tight camera angles and enclosed spaces of its *RE* heritage, though, whereas *RE4*'s open areas came as a surprise: how have you maintained the sense of tension in this new environment?
It is a different kind of tension: the expectation of attack from anywhere. You have almost no safe spots, no walls to protect you from an attack from behind. Houses and rooms may sometimes give you relative safety, and you can block a door or windows by pushing furniture, but the enemy will always find a way in, as they are very smart. There's no guarantee a barricade will last long. Outside, the terrain is not flat, and vegetation can hide the enemies – when you hear the sound of the chainsaw, you'll be very anxious to find where it is coming from, believe me! We also now have a battle soundtrack to give a dynamic to the combat. In earlier *RE*s we used the slowly opening doors to give the sentiment of terror, but in *RE4* the music will build as the intensity rises.



Previous *RE* games have always featured obviously monstrous opponents, but *RE4*'s early enemies are, at least in appearance, very much human. Has this been an issue with the game's reception?
Indeed. Only the US and Japan were able to experience the demo of the game first hand, although we even had the game on display at Nintendo's DS show recently. And yes, we had remarks about the violence inside the game, especially against human characters. But we are not glorifying the killing of people. Fans who know Leon's background should know that he is only reacting to a very hostile environment, and it is ultimately about self-defence. Of course, users don't think about self-defence while playing the game but the scenario is clear about this, especially when the true nature of these people is revealed later in the game. It is not like *San Andreas* where it is very much about hitting people. At the beginning you sense something strange about these villagers, but we could not possibly reveal the truth at that stage, as it would ruin all the fun, all the mystery of the scenario.

Is maintaining this 'mysterious' edge the reason you chose to voice the villagers in Spanish?
That was [Shinji] Mikami's idea! Leon speaks English and we wanted him, and the players, to be confronted with a language they could not understand, to add to the general tension. If everybody spoke English, it would be too familiar. As the game takes place in Europe, we thought we could use one of the European languages. So we tried several, but settled on Spanish as we found the intonation was right for our needs. But please don't misunderstand our choice – it was not meant in a negative way. It just sounds cool.

We've noticed some mechanic changes between the previous Tokyo Game Show version and this one: are these in response to player feedback?
Yes, we made many decisions after having watched people playing the game, and from

Making monsters



During our visit we also spoke with Clover Studio's **Yamanaka Masaki** (above), *RE4*'s lead enemy character designer, about the new approach.

How challenging has creature design been?
Until now we had the very same history of a virus transforming normal people into monsters. Now the game features human enemies, and we had to stay as close to the original tradition while still retaining their human appearance. So it is a delicate balance to also make these enemies seem evil enough, as threatening as in previous *RE* games. This was really challenging, as it's easier to make monsters! Having said that – I don't know how much I'm allowed to say here – but the enemies do appear in more monstrous forms at certain points.

Another challenge was when the game changed from an auto-targetting system to a manual aiming system. When you can aim at a particular section of the enemy's body, this has to be fun in some way. So for each section that could be hit there was a need for a certain reaction, to make that fun.

How much time does it take to model one of *Resident Evil 4*'s characters?
Well, the modelling alone takes one to two weeks of work, including creating the original design. Then the motion is another two to three weeks, but you need to set the bones before the animation can be performed, so overall it may take one and a half months to make a character. But most of the team are quite experienced now, so they often do the job in about a month. We have ten people on the character modelling team.

And what's your favourite enemy design?
The chainsaw man! I say that without hesitation. He is really dangerous, hard to kill – I think he is the most emblematic form of enemy in this game.

listening to their responses. For example, we saw the need for the knife to be quickly available in order to destroy item cases. So now instead of going through menus you can press L to use the knife. The map is now available quickly with one button press, and you can reload your weapon with R and B together. No need to go through a menu. I really want the game to be experienced naturally, without any break in the flow of action – and the change we made to reloading has an interesting consequence for the game mechanic, as you are reloading in real time, meaning Leon is vulnerable during that process.

One request we did not add was the side step. We tested it, but it hurt the game balance, making it less *RE* and more of a simple shooter. You could dodge most of the enemy attacks, and there was no more anxiousness over what could be waiting around corners, as you could look without exposing yourself entirely.

You talked earlier about using the GameCube remakes to learn the hardware: how much of that experience with a very different style of game could be transferred to *RE4*?
It's true that in *RE1* the background is a single layer whereas *RE4* uses environments in full 3D. We also display many more characters, and so we had to decrease the number of polygons used for them without losing visual quality. It is thanks to our past experience in working on the GC that we were able to deliver the sort of visuals that we have now, although this was not a result that came from our first try. When I told you we had four versions of the game, that was part of the experience-gathering process.





Production Studio 4 is based in Capcom's Osaka facility, the home of countless titles, including some of the *Street Fighter* series

How long have you spent on developing the engine across these four versions?
It could sound strange but we started working on it four years ago. The GC was not out at the time – the release was in 2002 and we were working on it already in 2001. So this engine is certainly reaching the limit of what the hardware can deliver. To be honest, we wanted more and had to cut things in order to keep the game running satisfactorily on the GC, but wherever possible, we tried another approach in order to keep as much content as possible.

"This engine is certainly reaching the limit of what the hardware can deliver. We wanted more and had to cut things to keep the game running satisfactorily"

Even though it seems to be this generation of hardware's final period, do you have any plans to use the engine again?
Actually, an early version of the engine was used to develop *PN03*, but I would really like to make a game using this engine after we have finished *RE4*. But looking at the market, it's not going to be easy... not impossible, but not easy.

Do you think the GC market can justify the amount of effort you spent on the game?
It will be tough, as the 'cute little box' did not sell as well as we had first hoped. The decision to release *RE4* on PS2 was not Production Studio 4's decision – we did not make a PS2 version to balance the weakness of the GC market. That aside, I really believe we have a great game. I'm aware that it will never sell as much as *Halo 2* or *GTA: SA*, knowing the size of the GC market. But I'm sure we'll deliver content as great as those games. Even if there's a difference in the marketing and selling power, I know we're on the same level there.

Village people

A quick play of the final code reveals a new type of action



The rifle – even without its extra scope – is a powerful weapon, dropping basic enemies with a single hit, and allowing Leon the luxury of attacking from a safe distance. Safe, that is, until he's noticed

Leon's inventory is roomier than the typical *Resident Evil* squat of a back pocket, but possessions have to be managed as in the likes of *Deus Ex*

When Kobayashi says you won't have time to rest in *Resident Evil 4* because enemies come from all directions, he's not joking. Within just a few minutes of play you get to see what he means. You've all seen the shots of the pallid villagers stalking toward Leon, sickles and pitchforks aloft, but the one thing they can't convey is just how effectively these psychopathic yokels manage to close in. It's not rare to find yourself attacking assailants in a frontal assault, only to be broadsided by a pitchfork from stage left. This doesn't feel like a cheap tactic, however – the joypad's C-stick gives you plenty of camera control to check out the locality, but the villagers still manage to creep around cautiously enough to give the impression of a malevolent intelligence.

None of the early stages convey this sensation more so than the beginning of Chapter 1-2, as Leon has to battle through a canyon of huts and criss-crossing walkways. The game manages to strike a solid balance between empowerment – by capably wielding some punch-packing weapons – and vulnerability. When a group of villagers lumber towards you, yelling and brandishing lit sticks of dynamite, there's as much dread as there is adrenaline as you try to snipe the sticks into detonation while still in their hands. Until that sudden pitchfork gets you again.

There are more lighthearted aspects to the game, however. One of your first sub-missions is a sharpshooting quest; a number of blue medallions are dotted around the opening stages. Shooting ten of them will mean a reward from the rogue-like, cockney salesman. Inside his long dirty coat is a ream of power-ups, weapons and upgrades that can be purchased with the money and valuables Leon finds. Anyone wanting to take this aspect seriously can even buy a treasure map, and spend their time hunting for booty, boosting the sensation of exploration in between all the gunfights (and pitchfork-dodging, of course). Yes, there's more here than at first meets the eye...

Paradise found

The story of how a tiny Icelandic company is making big waves in online gaming

TITLE: **EVE ONLINE**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SIMON & SCHUSTER/CCP GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **CCP GAMES**
ORIGIN: **ICELAND**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E106, E118, E124**



Reynir Hardarson controls the artistic direction of *Eve Online*. The lavish visual style is just one aspect of the overall vision of the game that he began working on way back in 1997

is a step backward. The worlds are no longer 'true' and magical. They feel like theme parks where you wait in line to get to the next merry-go-round."

In an attempt to buck this trend, *Eve* has always been dauntingly open-ended. It has also been staggeringly complex, with hundreds of skills and useable objects making even basic combat a feat to understand. Players find themselves dumped in a vast and complex game that they struggled to command, even after weeks of play. It has proved to be a slow burner, but is long-lived since there is so much to master. More significantly, this situation has caused some astonishing player-driven situations to emerge, as we were to discover.

On meeting with CCP in its ice-encrusted offices, the first questions, of course, involved how the developer has managed to perform such a Herculean task. To an outsider it seems hopelessly daunting. CCP's employees themselves are the first to admit that it hasn't been a smooth ride, particularly in starting from scratch. "We had no money and we had never done games," explains Hardarson as he talks about the problems and advantages of being a small Icelandic company. "Who wants to give money to people like that?" But they weren't coming at the project completely cold, since Hardarson and many of his current colleagues previously worked for the Icelandic technology company OZ. The kind of expertise necessary for an internet-based project – the fundamentals such as running banks of servers and creating highly complex databases – was something with which they had plenty of experience. For a game with *Eve*'s ambitions, this would prove a vital asset.

But before this high-technology venture could lift off, Hardarson and friends had to gather enough money to create a prototype. To do this they designed and manufactured a boardgame, Haettuspil (or 'Jeopardy'), which proved to be quite popular in Iceland. This basic exercise in game design gives a clue as to the real inspirations behind *Eve*'s game mechanics: when pressed for

The Ebay problem



Buying and selling *Eve* resources for money is rife, and is a serious problem for MMOGs, as Petursson explains: "This is a very touchy subject. We are against many aspects of it. But the problem is that players want to do it, they want to buy money. While there are people who want to do that there is not much we can do to stop it. And whatever we can do to stop it, there are new things people can do to get around it. What we worry about most is that people create what are essentially slave-labour camps just playing the game for cash. That is a problem." (For more on *Eve*'s economy, see p106.)



TomB (above), as he is known by the community, has the task of balancing *Eve*'s dozens of weapons and combat systems. He's probably thinking about electronic warfare right now



influences, Hardarson admits that few videogames have really been a part of *Eve*'s heritage: "I would say the biggest influence on *Eve* was Magic: The Gathering. Have you played it?" Yes, we're familiar with the fantasy card game, and, yes, the analogy is quite obvious when you examine the rock-paper-scissors nature of *Eve*'s combat system. However someone might attack, there is a way to counter it, or simply sidestep their ambitions, so long as you made the right choices in equipping your ship. Understanding how a game of this nature needed to be balanced has been an ongoing battle for the team, which relies on players as well as its own testers to ensure that nothing is left open for exploitation. Creating a system as refined as Magic: The Gathering is no mean task, particularly when it evolves month by month.

So, with Haettuspil on sale, the company had the first few thousand dollars it needed to create the prototype demos that would allow *Eve Online* to be developed. Hardarson and his core team worked throughout 1997 to 1999 to procure millions of dollars in venture capital, and there was no small element of luck that the project coincided with a boom in investment, particularly in Icelandic technology companies that wanted to move into the burgeoning internet arena.

"We took 18 months longer than we expected and it cost twice as much as we'd planned," says Hardarson, ruefully. "We've operated on a smaller scale [than companies like Blizzard], but we had a strong idea and we realised its potential." That's true in two ways: not only did CCP create the game it had aimed for, but it had also been farsighted enough to realise that there really was a market for a 'serious' non-franchise space-based game of a kind no one had previously dared to take into the multiplayer realm. The sole challenger, Westwood's *Earth & Beyond*, was little more than *EverQuest* with spaceships and was soon to be shut down by EA, giving *Eve* yet more subscribers.

"We took 18 months longer than we expected and it cost twice as much as we'd planned, but we had a strong idea and we realised its potential"



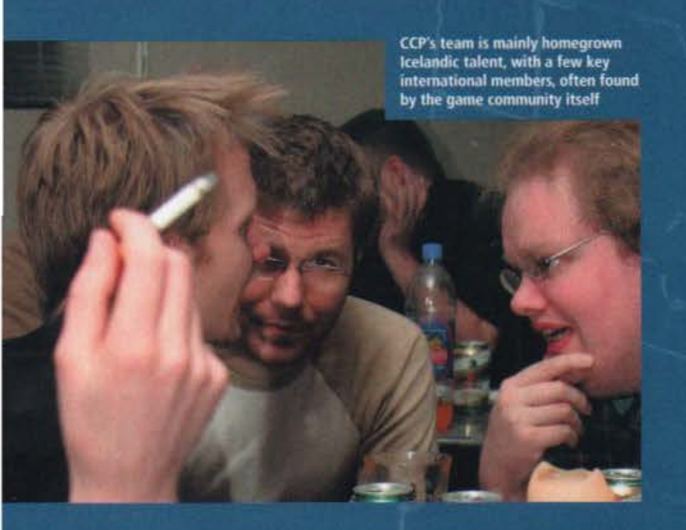
Kjartan Pierre Emilsson is the mathematics man behind *Eve Online*, responsible for programming and for envisioning how *Eve*'s economic and organisations structures will work

CCP's dealings with US publisher Simon & Schuster revealed a large gulf between how the developers saw their game and how the publishing company wanted to present it. *Eve*'s gritty, sophisticated and dark aesthetic was ignored by a publishing company that wanted to see bright colours and glowing spaceships and really didn't seem to grasp what the game was all about. Although useful in getting *Eve* out into the public eye, CCP was quick to buy back the publishing rights when, in 2004, Simon & Schuster dissolved its gaming arm. Since then, sign-ups have doubled and the game, published online as a 500Mb client, now boasts over 50,000 subscribers.

Hardarson attributes much of CCP's success to its freedom as a developer. It's his belief that the future of gaming lies in delivering content online. The fact that all of *Eve*'s 'expansion packs' (each one a comprehensive upgrade to the ongoing game) have been free as part of *Eve*'s monthly subscription is just one of many ways that CCP has gone against the trends of other massively multiplayer titles and created its own template. *Eve*'s galaxy is not one of many servers or 'shards', but a huge single galaxy, in which all 50,000 players coexist. Over 12,000 have been logged on to the game simultaneously, a record-breaking first for MMO gaming. Hardarson is keen to illustrate how evolving this kind of world is not a matter of adding new islands and continents as *EverQuest* had done, but instead in making an already vast galaxy even more detailed.

Chief among the architects of this artificial universe is mathematics guru **Kjartan Emilsson**. He demonstrates how the galaxy was created with a few simple fractal systems – we watch the organic growth of constellations, as Emilsson's algorithms create a new galaxy for the first time since *Eve* was taken to alpha stages. "If some things in the universe seem familiar," Emilsson laughs, "that's because the number behind it all is 42." The arbitrary number used to auto-generate *Eve*'s universe is, of course, a nod to the late Douglas Adams.

Eve is riddled with such references to the sci-fi classics, including 2001's black monolith hidden somewhere in deep space, but there is nevertheless a definite sense of this game being something unique, something iconoclastic, not just in terms of visuals or complexity but in the way in which the players themselves have driven its development. Even in the first week of play, the game's dynamic was being restructured by the emergent activities of its users. We ask company CEO **Hilmar Petursson** whether being able to mine into a cargo container (or can), the activity that has had many first-time players accusing the game of being little more than a mining simulator, had been intended by CCP. It is a loaded question: "Can mining was not intended, it was just a bug," he concedes. "The fact that


CCP's team is mainly homegrown Icelandic talent, with a few key international members, often found by the game community itself

you could eject a can and then mine to it was just an accidental discovery. We saw people doing it but didn't do anything about it. What we liked about it was the fact that players worked together, there was cooperation involved, so we began to structure the game's rewards around it. What the players did with mining had to be catered for. People like to mine, so we've ensured that people need a certain amount of organisation to get the most out of it."

And it was to be player innovation and organisation that would drive long-term activities in *Eve*. Back on his laptop in his basement office, Emilsson pulls up a diagram illustrating military hierarchies. It's his intention to find the best way for players to organise their manpower in game. The largest player teams (or corporations, in *Eve* parlance) now have several hundred members. Alliances of multiple corporations are even bigger and now require proper integration into the game. These pseudo-political groupings have created their own sovereign states within the galaxy and now jealously guard sectors of space from the intruders and enemy alliances that would plunder their resources. Their rise was foreseen by CCP, but the developer could not predict what features would be needed to accommodate them until they could be studied in action.

***Exodus*, *Eve*'s latest** comprehensive overhaul, has added to Hardarson's process of creating new detail. Even the open-ended nature of the game was to be addressed, as Petursson explains: "In the beginning it can be very difficult for a player to figure out what they should be doing. Especially if they don't enter a player corporation quickly they often don't really see how the game should work or what they should be doing. The idea for us is to create a more structured experience for players, with missions giving them hints about what they should be doing and suggesting that they should be joining up with player corps." This has been achieved through a large and variable selection of missions a player must undertake. Standings with various NPC factions define the missions a player can undertake and the innate political structure of the world means that work for any one faction can affect standings with others. It's an organic basis for a mission system that could well end up being far more emergent and fluid than anything we see in traditional 'point 'n' quest' RPGs. Nevertheless, missions can still feel clumsy. This is just one aspect of the game that CCP will have to continue to refine.

But the most important aspect of *Exodus* seems to be that it officially integrates the player alliances into *Eve*'s world. Command systems are being developed for the large-scale fleet combat that alliances have made their trademark, and *Exodus* has initiated new modes of play, such as the capacity for these alliances to 'officially' wage war across space without interference from the NPC police that otherwise maintain the status quo for the safety of beginners. Alliance territories are now registered on the in-game map and CCP has even offered to design logos for the factions, so that they can be properly incorporated into the game alongside NPC empires. The capacity to build player-owned structures so as to make better use of the in-game resources that players have claimed sovereignty over also marks a new milestone for *Eve*. This kind of gaming demands a new level of commitment to virtual resource management. For the 20,000 hardcore players this means the last year of play has been the basis for building space stations and outposts in the months to come. The resources they have claimed can be exploited more profitably with these lavish new tools.

"In the beginning it can be very difficult for a player to figure out what they should be doing. They often don't really see how the game should work"

This constant appropriation of materials and wealth is the heart of it all: *Eve* is about money. It has one of the most complex virtual economies in any game, and Emilsson and his team of programmers have developed a meticulous framework to be driven by player actions, supply and demand. Clearly proud of their achievements, Emilsson explains how the market aspect of *Eve* had been demonstrated at a regular conference on Natural Resource Economics at the University Of Iceland. Experimental


Though it's not the most penetrable experience, *Eve Online* now has a userbase well in excess of 50,000. Moreover, players exist within one expansive, spectacular universe

You and me against the world



Exodus has added some new player-versus-environment challenges in *Eve*, essentially dungeons where scores of enemies must be taken on by groups of players. In typical *Eve* fashion the dungeons are mostly unlike those in normal RPGs, requiring players to cripple and destroy large free-floating space structures to open up jump gates to new hidden sectors of space. Entirely open for anyone to access, these dead-space complexes might become popular ambush sites for player-pirates wishing to attack vulnerable players.

economists from across the world were frothing with excitement – they had no idea that such complex economic models existed. To their delight, the *Eve* economy, with its population of a small town, exhibited all the predictable trends and patterns of a real-world system, often providing evidence for their own theories. There were plans made to get students to play the game as a way of better grasping economic processes. CCP promises that this is only going to become more sophisticated, with a whole new range of skills and features introduced in *Exodus*. Making *Eve* a success after *Exodus* will partly depend on keeping this economy stable so players can reap the rewards of their efforts. One plan is to introduce shares, so that a player's corporation can float as a 'public' company. For now, though, the opportunities for virtual fraud are too great and CCP is knuckling down to tackle how to constrain such an ambitious idea in the game world.

CCP expects to work on *Eve* for years to come and, says Emilsson, it'll continue to develop for as long as people elect to play it: "When we talk about the future, it is a very long future that we have in mind. There is an immediate future that we work on and then another future of things that might come to be over time. It's a long way off." To illustrate this he pulls up a recent demonstration mock-up of how flying to planetary surfaces might work in a game that was, until now, completely space-bound. Once again, his auto-generation skills will be required to furnish tens of thousands of moons and planets. The planet's surface is grim and barren – "a little like Iceland," says Emilsson with a chuckle. "With this we are like the opposite of *Star Wars Galaxies*. Our game is growing inwards." Once again, CCP is swimming against the current and, so far at least, it seems to be working.



Hilmar Petursson began his work on *Eve* as lead programmer, but now acts as the company CEO, coordinating the mammoth efforts of the very different elements of his talented team

Future perfect?



Screen Photography: Nick Wilson



Looks aren't everything. But what happens when exceptional power meets truly exceptional beauty?



Think back to that moment, 14 months ago, when you first saw the PSP prototype. Forget for now your space-age swoon at all that gleaming blackness. Forget the hundreds of questions that crowded your mind, the breathless 'Is that really?'s and the 'But how does it?'s. Remember instead what was on the screen. Shimmering water, deepening from lucent turquoise to sooty blue. Fish, bright as flame. It may have been a mock-up, a cut'n'paste convenience, but it wasn't an accident. For its shocking, thrilling debut, Sony turned its PSP into a fish tank. Holding one now, it's still the clearest way to describe the astonishment of gazing down into that extraordinary screen. The colour and the clarity seem to go on for ever, pulling you down into new and unpredictable worlds. In a Bill Plympton cartoon it would swallow you whole, as you plunged an arm, a head, a whole person into that bottomless portal.

This isn't hyperbole, it's based on simple, measurable facts: 130,560 pinpricks phase through more than 16 million colours, forming a frame that matches your natural field of vision. Many gamers have never experienced their worlds in widescreen: none have ever done so mere inches from their eyes. The effect isn't what you might think. It's surprisingly relaxing, as your eyes and brain go off duty from having to disregard all the extraneous clutter which usually fills your peripheral vision. Sinking in to what you're being shown, whether game or film, becomes the path of least resistance. It's impossible not to think: 'This is how it was always meant to be'.

We're used to being shortchanged by the future. Some days it's hard not to resent the absence of hoverpods, food replicators and lunar tourism: the 21st century wasn't supposed to feature Routemaster buses, Coronation Street and the resurgence of tweed. Sony's PSP feels like the first device to deliver on those sci-fi promises. Surprisingly small, it barely feels big enough to contain the luxurious acreage of the screen. Vibrant LEDs wink amid transparent buttons and silver flanges. It is without question the most instantly desirable games console ever designed. It might well be the most instantly desirable piece of home electronics ever produced, a supposition which should keep **Edge**'s letters pages busy for months to come.

However, before we're accused of being the worst kind of graphics whores, consider what you will be seeing on that wondrous screen. Much of the PSP speculation has centred on tracking where the machine's graphical performance will slot into the established hierarchy. First it was going to be PSone quality, then better than PS2. Then PS1.5, then a little bit better than that. PS1.8? PS1.84? It is, in many respects, a pointless question. Viewing a game on a PSP is simply too radically different from sitting across the room from a TV for the comparison to have much practical meaning. For what it's worth, the best of what's been seen so far most closely resembles mid-generation PS2 titles, but the fruits of building games for a system with a standardised and high-quality display are only beginning to be reaped.

The games themselves are, as with any launch, a mixed bag. The previews on the following pages, as well as reviews of *Ridge Racers*, *Metal Gear Acid*, *Kollon*, *Lumines*,

Vampire and *Dynasty Warriors* later in the magazine, give an indication of what strides have been taken to develop games which successfully exploit the PSP's unique nature, as well of where developers have fallen back on already tired formulas. What they all have in common, however, is the hardware through which you experience them, and that too, in some respects, is a mixed bag.

The PSP's audio capabilities are very strong, but neither the built-in speakers nor the supplied headphones can do them justice. It's not until you plug in a good set of 'phones (preferably in conjunction with *Lumines*) that you get a true sense of the audio quality. MP3 playback is good, if not quite of the standard of the very best portable players, and copying files across from a PC via a USB cable (not supplied) is quick and straightforward. The playback software is simple, but offers a good range of options: one small frustration is that it doesn't save your place in a track when you put the machine into sleep mode. A dedicated music button allows you to swap between pre-set equalizer settings.

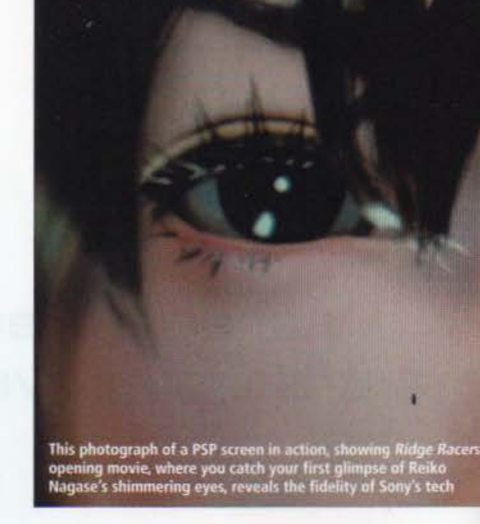
The traditional controls – D-pad, four face buttons, two shoulder buttons, start and select – work as well as they ever have. The concave D-pad has a smooth, gentle action which works well for controlling 3D games, but lacks some of the clicky precision which is often welcome in 2D gaming. More controversial is the analogue slider. Very different in feel from a tilting stick, the flat slider needs a very delicate touch to take full advantage of its range. Some will also find it positioned uncomfortably low on the device. Many developers confess that they have relied heavily on the D-pad in the early stages of their PSP projects, although they emphasise that most team members happily converted to the slider as they spent more time with the machine. Time will tell how skilled developers become at calibrating their games for its unique feel, but as things stand there's no question it gives functioning analogue control to PSP games.

Aside from the gaming buttons, the PSP's detailing feels ever so slightly cheap. The power slider, which flicks the game in and out of sleep mode, as well as fulfilling on, off and hold modes, feels loose and indistinct. A similar slider flicks out the UMD loader, which also feels slightly flimsy, although the discs themselves snap into place very satisfyingly. The shoulder buttons are also a little clacky and noisy enough (at least on new machines) to make you somewhat self-conscious in a quiet room. Considering the price point at which Sony has launched the device, these small complaints seem a little churlish, but it's hard not to wonder how magnificent the machine might have been if it could have been finished to the highest specifications.

Also set into the front of the device is a 'home' button, which will return you straight to the main menu from within whatever aspect of the device you are using. The menu system itself, the much-vaunted cross-media bar (or XMB), is a refined version of that introduced with the PSX. Presentation is stark and clean, and navigation is swift and sure – certainly a dramatic improvement on the comparitively dreadful PlayStation2 frontend.



Many were skeptical about the prototype PSP shots. However, Sony has ultimately delivered a gaming machine which is, if anything, even more impressive than those alluring first photos suggested



This photograph of a PSP screen in action, showing *Ridge Racers* opening movie, where you catch your first glimpse of Reiko Nagase's shimmering eyes, reveals the fidelity of Sony's tech

Video playback, unquestionably one of the majo selling points of the device, is still a problematic proposition. Sony is still maintaining that a strong line-up of retail movies will be available on UMD, bu as yet there is little clear confirmation on how extensive this will be, or how it will be priced. It's possible to upload your own video files (via USB) to Memory Stick, but the process is a little more complicated than it sounds. The PSP uses basic MPEG4 encoding, but requires it to be presented in a proprietary wrapper. For those who already own, say a Sony video camera, the process is simple, as footage will be automatically recorded in the Sony-friendly profile. For those using non Sony-friendly hardware, it will be necessary to convert files on a PC using Sony's Image Converter program. However, it's not yet clear how user-friendly a piece of software this will be, or how it will be distributed to PSP users. This leaves a question mark hanging over the PSP's potential as a massmarket personal movie player. It's a question mark which can be easily resolved with a convincing UMD movie release schedule, the provision of simple, accessible conversion software, and a drop in price of Memory Sticks, but until Sony can make concrete announcements on these factors, the reservations still stand.

There is, of course, another avenue through which Sony can provide video footage for your PSP: wireless download. The unit's wireless capabilities are an aspect of the machine that are only beginning to show their true potential. Split between ad-hoc and infrastructure modes, they allow nearby PSPs to connect to each other direct, and to the internet via wireless hotspots. Ad-hoc mode's obvious implications are for multiplayer gaming, and titles such as *Ridge Racers* demonstrate emphatically how well this can work, connecting eight players with straightforward ease. A less well-publicised aspect is the game share mode. Sony won't confirm how widespread this feature will be, but there is the possibility for games to beam multiplayer or demo versions of themselves to other PSPs which don't







The PSP's ports are very neatly designed, making the rear of the machine as slinky as the front. Although tests have proven that the UMD slot can be used to launch disks halfway across the room, the usual action is much more controlled



have the software. The feature has already shown its worth on the DS, and it will be a valuable feature of the PSP if it's exploited to its full advantage.

Infrastructure wi-fi is another aspect of the PSP which hasn't yet been clearly articulated by Sony. Its potential is vast. True online gaming is an obvious and enormous attraction for many gamers. Downloadable content, which is being most dramatically pioneered by *Wipeout Pure*, means that new tracks, levels and characters – even language packs – can be added throughout the game's lifespan. Movie trailers for forthcoming games (as well as, presumably, forthcoming movies) could be made available. Ultimately, playable demos and even full OS updates could be downloaded direct to your PSP. To further complicate matters, many of these features could be accomplished either by downloading software direct to your PSP, or by downloading it to a PC and transferring it via USB. As yet, it's impossible for anyone – not even Sony – to accurately predict how pivotal a part of PSP ownership these possibilities will become: the territory is simply too uncharted. What is clear is that some aspects of the online shift will be the same as they are for any console – the tantalising prospect of online multiplayer and extra content balanced by the spectres of extra charges and patches for unfinished software.

Another unknown at this stage is how aggressively regional lockouts will be implemented on PSP software. The hardware is global: the PSP is the same wherever you are in the world. However, Sony has taken the decision to allow publishers to choose whether or not to implement region coding. The nearest parallel is Xbox, where publishers can choose whether or not to region protect a game. Overwhelmingly they do so, and in the few cases where games are region free it is sometimes simply because the developer didn't get around to implementing the protection before the game went to be pressed. If the PSP follows this pattern, then it will fly in the face of the mantra that has helped keep Nintendo on top of the handheld tree for so long. Despite a natural tendency towards draconian control measures, Nintendo has kept the GB family region free, understanding that this supports its function as a portable device. To be able to take your PSP anywhere in the world, but not play games from anywhere in the world, seems like a decision made in the interests of publishers rather than players.

Which brings us, at last, to the aspect of the PSP which dominated its pre-release hype: the battery. The short answer is that despite all the earlier anxieties, the PSP's battery is good enough. It's hard to predict exactly how much use you'll get from it, since different games draw such different amounts of power from the machine. Let *Ridge Racers* rip at full pelt – wi-fi multiplayer, speakers on full, screen at its brightest, and you'll easily drain the machine in under three hours. Relax with some MP3s, headphones on and screen off, and it will run for eight to ten. Most games will give you between four and six hours' play. Longer, of course, would be welcome, but battery life hasn't proved to be the Achilles heel it looked for so long that it might be.

So, after that instant physical attraction has worn off, is it still the most desirable videogame console ever conceived? That's a question that can only be answered with time. The machine's power means a slower development cycle than that of other handhelds, and its multimedia and wireless possibilities are extensive and complex. As a result, it will probably take all of 2005 to unveil the full potential of Sony's black beauty. If it conquers all the technical challenges it faces, it will be unstoppable. And, truth be told, even if it stumbles as a movie player and has an online service as patchy as the Dreamcast's, it will still be unstoppable.

Sony's PlayStation Portable has the looks, the brand and the price. To see it is to want it: a slice of the future lying gleaming in the palm of your hand. All you need to do is dive in.

It has the looks, the brand and the price. To see it is to want it: a slice of the future gleaming in the palm of your hand. All you need to do is dive in

Continued ›









UMDs prove very pleasing to handle, as is PSP game packaging in general. However, the square aperture on the rear through which the disk is read makes them feel slightly vulnerable, so don't be surprised to see protective wallets do a brisk trade



Q Entertainment

Ex-UGA producer **Tetsuya Mizuguchi**'s Q Entertainment recently announced a partnership with Japanese giant Bandai for a new PSP and DS label, ((qb)), or Quest Beat. ((qb))'s manifesto is to expand the gaming market through a combination of the handhelds' unique qualities, new game experiences and collaborations with artists from genres outside of the videogame industry. We quizzed Mizuguchi on the brand, the PSP, and his debut title *Lumines*.

When you left Sega, was it your intention to focus only on the new handheld game machines?
Q Entertainment is not a handheld-only development company – it's just at the moment we happen to be working on a handheld platform. Ideally, we'd like to expand our current products into franchises – it could be on console, mobile phone, or PC. The possibilities are infinite.

You have spoken about making games that people can play without needing a manual. Do you feel gaming has become too complicated?
I don't think there is any problem with gaming at the moment being too difficult or complicated. The real issue is who is going to purchase and play on a platform like PSP. I imagine there are a lot of users who just want to play games with joy – they don't want to think about where or when to play. I want to reach those people.

Do you think many people who do not currently play games will buy a DS or a PSP?
Because a handheld console enables the user to play games anywhere and anytime, I think these new machines will bring a lot of old gamers back to gaming. Even the people who never played games before may start playing. But ((qb)) doesn't want to produce games especially for newcomers. We'd like all the users to feel new experiences, and recover the sense of fun with the new style of our games.

What is it about the PSP and the DS that appeals to you?
PSP has great visual and sound capabilities, and you can carry it around. It's more like an interactive Walkman than a games machine. The DS has the unique stylus touchscreen. So, for me, this is a new generation of an electronic toy. But I think the DS features very unique and interesting functions.

Is there anything about the PSP or DS that frustrates you? Are you disappointed by the DS's audio capabilities?
Well, if I start discussing the perfect machine, there will be no limit, so let's not get going on that discussion! It's true the DS's sound capability could be better, but it balances very well with the rest of the functions.

What has been your favourite experience with developing on the PSP?
It took a long time before Sony announced the detailed specs for the PSP, so the majority of designing and development has to be done in our imagination. That was fun. Everyone in the team had very different images about how the hardware would look.

Who are the creators you would most like to work with? And do you think that it's still hard to get some artists/musicians/animators to take videogames seriously?
I think the creative winter has ended, or will do very soon. But, for the moment, I cannot reveal who I will be working with…

Sony's UK launch line-up

Little has been confirmed about the PSP's UK launch at this stage, not price, date or thirdparty line-up. What is known is Sony Europe's firstparty launch roster; our early hands-on impressions follow over the next five pages...

Wipeout Pure









The jewel in the UK launch line-up is also the game nearest completion. The presentation is as startlingly beautiful as you would expect, defining the PSP's future-cool status as surely as the original did for the PlayStation. Stripped back from the later games' excesses, *Pure* promises simpler, starker racing and then sprinkles that promise with a hundred tempting cherries: wireless multiplayer, downloadable tracks, ships, tunes and skins. A brief hands-on wasn't enough to form a solid opinion on the all-important handling, but there's every reason to be hopeful for an exceptional version of a classic series.



Sony Liverpool

Wipeout's home has always been in Liverpool, and a few surviving members of the original line-up make up part of *Pure*'s 26-strong creative team. We spoke with **Tony Buckley** (producer), **Colin Berry** (game designer) and **John Machin** (graphic artist) about their new take on an old vision of the future.

Does the name *Pure* mean you're taking the game back to its original, pared-down styling?
Obviously some of the iterations since the original didn't really go the way some fans might have liked – I'm not saying they weren't good games, but we wanted to go back to some of the things that people liked from all of the games we produced. We took the Zone mode from *Fusion*, we've gone back to less weapons like the earlier games, and we've tried to get the handling back to *2097* – which we thought was head and shoulders above the rest.

Handling and control are crucial – how do you feel about the D-pad and analogue slider?
The D-pad's great. The slider I think is going to take people a little time to get used to – no one can lie about that, because it's totally... I've tried to describe it to friends outside the industry who are used to N64 or DualShock sticks, and you can't really describe it. Once they get used to it, I think it'll become a useful part of the machine, but at first I think people will be a little shocked by it. Everyone thought it was a speaker! A lot of people are playing it with the D-pad at the moment, but I think it's like when the analogue controllers first came out on the PlayStation – no one really picked up on using it until they realised it had its advantages.

What was your reaction when you finally saw the finished PSP?
When we saw it running at E3 this year, we all said the same thing: the machine looks smaller than we thought and the screen is absolutely... fucking huge [laughs]. And when we finally got the dev kits in August, everybody in the studio said exactly the same thing. The screen is huge.

You picked up really strongly on the PSP's wireless connectivity. How early on did you decide to commit to that?
From when we saw the specs, really. As soon as we heard it was WiFi that gave us a hell of a lot of options, and then there was the Memory Stick, so we were thinking of ways in which the game would always be *Wipeout*, but could also have things added to it to justify bringing it out on a new console. That's where the downloadable content and extra design elements that gave to us came from.

Are you worried about how new PSP owners will cope with the wealth of downloadables?
Not really – I mean, people use iPods now. It's something which is available that wasn't previously available outside of PCs, especially not on a handheld console, and I can't see them not wanting it.

The *Wipeout* series has a tradition of collaborating with outside designers. Do you have anyone lined up to provide downloadable content for the game?
We've created the levels with a lot of billboards, which opens a lot of opportunities – what people want to do with those levels, how they'll link to downloadable levels I'm not quite sure yet. But because those billboards are there, *Pure* could even become like an ar gallery within a game. What we're hoping for is a lot o player input.





Kuju Entertainment

Kuju has four studios across the UK, and is currently at work on the GameCube version of *Advance Wars*. We spoke to their PSP team about their upcoming flight game, *Interceptor*.

What's the genesis of *Interceptor*?
Interceptor started life as a technology demo we were working on to investigate the capabilities of the PSP. Once we had it running on the PSP hardware, we realised how much fun it was to play, how easily the hardware could handle drawing detailed terrain and the possibilities wi-fi support opened up. This means that certain 'sim' aspects have been dropped in favour of a more exhilarating fast-paced arcade game.

Flight games – even arcade-style examples – aren't especially popular on home consoles. What made you want to develop one for the PSP?
It may have started as a technology project but *Interceptor* has evolved into an original and appealing game concept. We do think there is a market for this type of game, in our minds Nintendo's *PilotWings* comes under the flight game banner and is not seen as a geeky flight sim. The target demographic for the PSP is much older than that of other handheld platforms. This allows us more flexibility in the type of games we are creating in terms of content and gameplay. We see the PSP appealing to a more open-minded audience who will embrace new gameplay mechanics and genres. The PSP also allows us to create new IP for the future – something that is near impossible on the more established consoles.

How big a difference did the screen dimensions make to your game design? And how have you found working with the PSP's controls?
The PSP screen is a revelation especially when it comes to doing a flight game. A larger field of view is particularly useful when it comes to dog-fighting, and the additional screen space ensures that heads-up displays do not clutter the main view.

The lack of a second analogue stick can be problematic for flight games, but after a lot of thought we are confident that we can provide an intuitive and exciting flying experience. The PSP analogue stick takes some getting used to but does provide as much sensitivity as a DualShock controller.

The last year has seen a real shift in the quality of PS2 games as developers have been able to use their experience of the hardware to exploit its full potential. Do you feel the PSP has similar scope for growth, or is its technology already fairly optimised and understood?
The PSP has massive potential, especially with inbuilt wi-fi support and with crossover products for its other entertainment abilities (movies and music). In terms of the learning curve I would imagine the first wave of titles to rival second-generation PS2 titles. As developers get more familiar with the hardware and use their experience gained from the PS2 I would expect the second generation of PSP titles to rival the games we are currently seeing on the PS2. In order for this to happen in practice the development budgets will have to come through and this will rely on the publisher's perceived success of the platform. As a developer it's a great machine to develop for – even now we can see the potential it has for years to come.

MediEvil











There's a complicated stat attached to this game – *MediEvil* is the most popular PSone franchise which hasn't been updated in the 128bit generation. The PSP version is an entirely new game, but many aspects of it will be familiar to those who loved the original. It's a lavish production, with spacious levels, an orchestral score and the voice of Tom Baker dryly narrating your journey. From the code we've played, there remain some questions about the control system: the deliberately flamboyant, marionette-style animation, combined with our unfamiliarity with the analogue slider, left the game feeling loose and awkward. Hopefully the finished version will feel very different.





Planet Moon Studios

Reliably eccentric Californian residents Planet Moon (of *MDK*, *Giants* and *Armed & Dangerous* infamy) surprised industry observers earlier in the year by announcing their committal to the PSP for future projects. We spoke to producer **Aaron Loeb**, currently waist-deep in development of their yet-to-be-unveiled project *Infected*.

When you made the decision to go PSP exclusive, did you have any inkling of the low pricepoint Sony was going to announce? And what was your reaction when you heard the news?
We had an inkling that it would be priced for the masses. That hunch was bolstered when we attended E3 2004 and Tokyo Game Show. Financial analysts, retailers, publishers, and developers all said it would be a mistake to release the system at $300, the price a lot of people were assuming. Sony has not proven itself prone to colossal blunders in the game space. Our hunch was that they would move heaven and earth to get the system out at $250 or less. But our reaction will reveal how certain we were of that hunch – we jumped up and down, kissed complete strangers, cracked open a few pints and breathed several sighs of relief.

Are you surprised more independent developers haven't committed to the format in the way you have?
No. It seemed very risky when we first announced our strategy. But now that it's out in Japan and looks as unbelievable as it does, is as powerful as it is and is priced like it is, I would be very surprised if more don't join the bandwagon. Part of us hopes that others don't realize how amazing the system is, though; we want it all for ourselves.

Other than the obvious implications of wi-fi, how has the handheld nature of the machine changed the way you design games?
There are many other considerations ranging from technology to design. This generation of handhelds (PSP and DS) provide the first 3D platforms where you know the exact resolution and aspect ratio at which the game will be viewed. This has a big impact on asset creation and tweaking; if it looks fantastic on your PSP screen, it will look fantastic on the player's as well. You no longer have to worry about scaling assets so that they work at lower resolutions (as on PC) or so that they don't look muddy at higher resolutions (as on consoles using HDTV). Add to that the gorgeous screen on the PSP, and you have a recipe for very polished graphics.

Do you think PSP game quality will evolve in the way PS2 games did, or is it already a mostly optimised device?
This is a first-of-its-kind device. Not only will there be room for technological growth as we've seen with previous generations of consoles, but we can expect an exciting growth on the platform in design. Right now, everyone's only guessing how gamers will use a handheld, widescreen, wi-fi 3D platform. Once we start seeing how the consumer is playing real games on real systems, we can expect incredible and unprecedented game ideas to blossom. As examples, no one knew the Xbox was going to spawn *Halo* parties. No one knew the EyeToy would be the party device it's become in Europe. When people really start using the PSP, the games are sure to evolve.

Ape Academy

It's impossible to avoid the handy '*Ape Escape* meets *Wario Ware*' explanation of this game, but that doesn't quite do it justice. The minigames are as bizarre as you would expect, and the best have more staying power than Wario's micro diversions. Developed by the team behind *Xi* (*Devil Dice*), the most notable inventiveness comes in games that require two players to compete on the same PSP, one at each end. It makes for one of the most intense, if preposterous, gaming experiences of recent times. All that's obviously missing from *Ape Academy* is the elegant and charming presentation which made *Ape Escape* so irresistible.







Football



Sony is staying coy about the final name for this title, perhaps trying to indicate that This Isn't Football, even though it so obviously Is. There's no question that a good football game is going to be one of the PSP's most obvious killer apps in Europe, but despite some solid presentation this doesn't seem to be a likely contender for that role.

The title's early release, combined with full wi-fi support (including the ability to alert any other PSPs in your vicinity that you're up for a game) may make it a more popular purchase than its slightly lacklustre gameplay would seem to deserve.







Namco

It seemed as if *Ridge Racers* progressed from a promising, if empty TGS prototype to the PSP's most solid and impressive Japanese launch title overnight – and in truth, the game's development period was only slightly more relaxed. Associate producer **Hideo Teramoto** spoke to us about the race to launch day.

It seems to be traditional for PlayStation consoles to launch with a *Ridge* game: were you under pressure to deliver a special title to live up to this tradition?

Yes, we definitely felt the pressure! This is because as well as being a traditional PlayStation launch title, the *Ridge Racer* series has always been among the first titles to fully showcase the performance and features of new PlayStation hardware.

Our goals with *Ridge Racers* were to launch with the hardware, utilise the capabilities of the PSP as much as possible and present new and fun gameplay for the players. Achieving these goals on time was very challenging, but at the same time the team greatly enjoyed these challenges.

What difficulties did you encounter producing a game with so much content and quality in such a short development period?

We were very surprised by the capabilities of the PSP. There is so much more we would like to have done to push its features even more, but we had to complete the title in a very short time in order to launch with the Japanese hardware. Usually trade-offs are made when developing a high-quality title within such a tight schedule, and it wasn't an easy challenge for us.

Were there any specific difficulties in implementing the eightplayer multiplayer – far more than previous *Ridge* titles?

Everything was hard! It was a launch title, so the development tools for PSP were incomplete, and kept evolving as we were creating the game. Our programmers said different things every day, such as: 'Maybe we can have only two players', or 'Perhaps we can get six players connected', or 'Sorry, we can't have more than four players working'. Then eventually they made it possible for up to eight players to connect at once. They did everything they could think of to accomplish this, and really deserve a round of applause!

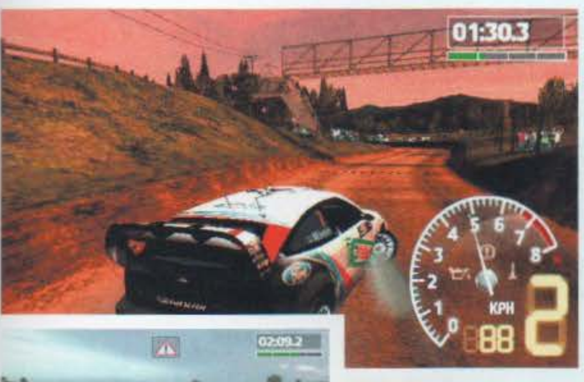
How do you think your team was able to draw so much out of the machine so early? And how much potential for improvement do you think there is for later PSP games?

As with any new hardware, there really is no shortcut for getting the most out of the PSP. The final quality of the game is just a result of continued effort and research. The *Ridge* team really put everything they had into this game, and I am extremely proud of the team for being able to create a game of such quality.

I believe that similar to the five-year evolution of PS2 games, PSP games will also noticeably improve from everyone's first efforts.

We were able to create beautiful graphics running at 60 frames per second. However, at the same time we intentionally reduced the CPU clock speed in order to conserve battery power. This was one of the most difficult technical challenges for us. Future titles may use the maximum clock speed of 333MHz, but sacrifice battery life to do so.

WRC



At an earlier stage of development than some of the other titles available to play right now, *WRC* is one of the games which makes best use of the PSP's enormous screen. Rally games have always had a powerful sense of atmosphere, and *WRC*'s recreation of the wilds is already impressive. Work remains to be done on the handling – the developer, Traveller's Tales, admits that many on the team are still playing from the D-pad (although it must be stressed that the game handles well with that control method), but there's every indication that the PSP version of the game will be as well presented and fully featured as its PS2 cousin.





Formula One

Talking to developers makes one thing clear: Sony has been banging the 'opportunistic play' drum very hard at anyone working on PSP. It's got to be pick-up-and-play-and-put-down-again, which is not an easy play style to integrate with an F1 game. The result is a much more arcadey experience, where you won't have to worry about collision damage, tweaking downforce settings or completing 72 laps. The developer has done a good job in achieving its aim of simplifying the handling, but the result robs F1 of some of its distinctive feel. If you want to play an arcade racer and you're not an F1 nut, why choose this when there's *Ridge Racers*?







Fired Up



The name has changed, but *Fired Up* wears its *Hardware* heritage very clearly on its sleeve. Although the singleplayer mode has been bolstered, the emphasis remains on vehicle-mayhem multiplayer. This works very smoothly over wireless, and the game's solid physics means that the rough and tumble of pitching tanks against 4x4s is very satisfying.

Overall handling isn't spectacular, however, and despite some innovative weapons there isn't much of a spark to the deathmatches. There is still work to be done on the code we played, but as things stand, *Fired Up* feels slightly lifeless and old-fashioned.



Everybody's Golf

It was great on the PSone. It was good on the PS2. It's going to be just as satisfying on the PSP, but it's frankly disconcerting to be faced with such an archaic play mechanic on such a futuristic device. Stopping sliders on bars may be a proven control scheme, but it feels anachronistic in the analogue age. Aside from familiarity, *Everybody's Golf* offers its usual balance of achingly cute presentation and complex and precise golf play. Wireless multiplayer works smoothly, but can be a little uninvolving since you track opponents' progress purely with stats, so face a frustrating wait for the poorest player to finish a hole.









Ready At Dawn

Though Californian PSP developer Ready At Dawn is a new studio, it's one drawing on proven talent from Blizzard, Capcom Digital, Naughty Dog and the comics industry for its current – still under wraps – action-adventure title. We spoke to co-founder **Didier Malenfant**, whose programming history stretches from Amiga demo scene chip-frying to tools design for *Jak & Daxters 1* and *2*.

Had you already decided to develop for the PSP when you founded Ready At Dawn?
Yes, I had made my decision to leave Naughty Dog a little bit before the E3 where the PSP was announced. When I heard the specs, knowing Sony's technical and marketing skills, it was a given that it was the platforn we wanted to work on. It seemed like a gamble to some at the time, but to us it was the platform that ha us the most excited and we went at it head first.

You've all come from traditional home console o computer backgrounds: how has the adjustment to developing for a handheld been? Has the PSP' power eased the transition?
The main differences have to do with the game design itself, rather than the technical side. From the get-go we approached the PSP just like a PS2 in terms of the technical scope of our game. Many developers targete really low on the power curve for their PSP projects whereas we used a somewhat kamikaze approach and aimed for the moon. For the PC guys, I think it was quite a relief to finally work on a stable platform and spend our time trying to make the most of it rather than shoot for a moving target.

One of the most impressive features of *Jak & Daxter's* engine, and those of later PS2 titles, has been the use of streaming for seamless worlds: have Sony's limitations on UMD access hamstrun this school of design on the PSP?
I don't know where those rumours of battery life problems and Sony limiting developers' access to the UMD come from, we've never heard of such a thing. I think it comes down to common sense; everything on a handheld consumes power. It's nothing new, really, an just like graphics or memory useage you always end up juggling a bit to make sure you make the most of wha is available to you. As people get better at this, I'm sur some games will use the same kind of streaming syster as the one we developed at Naughty Dog. We're definitely looking into it already ourselves.

After working with a development kit for most c the year, what was your reaction when you got your hands on a Japanese production unit?
I was still blown away. I can't think of anybody who won't be awed when they pick one of these up. To see fullblown 3D games like *Ridge Racers*, *Armored Core* o our game running on a handheld is a mind-blowing experience. It gets some people, including me, thinkin about not owning a home console... it's that good.

Upcoming PSP games

- Archer Maclean's Mercury
- New Ape Escape game
- Bleach (SCEJ fighter)



- New Burnout game
- Coded Arms (Konami FPS)
- Death, Jr.
- Free Running (Eidos)
- Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core
- New Grand Theft Auto game
- Harvest Moon
- New Level 5 (Dark Cloud creator) RPG
- Makai Wars (Nippon Ichi)
- Need For Speed Underground Rivals
- New Princess Crown game (Atlus)
- New Persona game (Atlus)
- New Sega title
- New ((qb)) title
- Shinobidu Imashime (Acquire ninja title)
- Shutokou Battle: Zone Of Control
- Sengoku Cannon (new Psikyo shooter)
- New Stormfront title
- New Tecmo title
- Tales Of Melfes (Namco RPG)
- Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix
- Twisted Metal: Head-On



- New Tenchu game
- Tenchi No Mon (Climax (of Landstalker fame) action-RPG)



- Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade (SOE wi-fi dungeon crawler)



Phil Harrison

The executive vice president of development for SCEE talks about the PSP's multimedia potential, its relationship to other games machines and the challenge of bringing such a desirable device to market

How important do you expect the potential to be for USB link-up between PS2 and PSP?
There are many interesting game design features that can be introduced by connecting a PSP and a PS2. We're already seeing titles use this feature like *Armored Core Formula Front* in Japan and I expect many other titles to use this feature, too.

Are there plans for more ambitious uses for it, such as transferring music from a PS2 game to the PSP music player, for example, or even playable games?
The possibilities should be endless – as developers get beyond the launch of PSP and are into a more longterm design and development phase, I believe we'll see some really innovative uses of the interoperability and connectivity of PSP and PS2.

Do you see it as a way to encourage consumers to buy both PSP and PS2 copies of the same game or series?
That may be a side benefit, but it's really a great way of extending the gameplay experience from a game on PS2 in the home to PSP anywhere. PSP and PS2 games – and their characters – can become constant companions in your life, if you wish.

What about the Image Converter software needed to upload your own movie files to the PSP?
The Image Converter software creates the PSP profile wrapper around the MPEG4 stream. This matches the content for the PSP screen dimensions, for example. The software can be downloaded and we're exploring other ways of bringing it to the user, both as a standalone piece of software and by building the converters into other software products and online services.

What systems does the software have to prevent piracy?
Digital Rights Management is an integral part of the PSP design, with many security features built into both UMD, Magic Gate and the CPU. How this is actually used obviously remains confidential but there will be many audio and video contents that can be freely distributed with or without DRM. The whole point of a DRM system is that it enables the content owner to decide how their copyrighted material is made available to the end user and if it can be freely distributed to other users or not.

Memory Stick Duo remains more expensive than other memory formats such as SD and MMC cards. Do you see that as a permanent pattern, or do you expect Memory Stick pricing to catch up?
Memory Stick Duo delivers high memory capacity, low cost, a small form-factor and is widely adopted in hundreds of consumer electronics and mobile communications products from dozens of manufacturers. The global pricing for Memory Stick has fallen sharply over recent years – as demand for higher memory capacity increases, the cost comes down. We expect this trend to broadly continue as more suppliers enter the Memory Stick market.

How do you expect people to watch the bulk of the video they watch on their PSP – from downloaded content, self-produced content or retail UMD?
That's the beauty of PSP. You decide. This empowers the user to enjoy whatever content they want, wherever they want. Downloaded or converted TV content on to Memory Stick is a great way to catch up on last night's favourite TV shows on the way to work.

> "Downloaded or converted TV content on Memory Stick is a great way to catch up on last night's favourite TV shows on the way to work"

Has Sony considered an 'iTunes'-style music and movie download service to dovetail with the PSP's capabilities?
Yes, absolutely – in fact we've already made announcements in the US about partnerships with the Sony Connect service.

Although a lot of media attention has focused on the 'DS versus PSP showdown', is it not fairer to say that your nearest competitor is really yourself, allowing for your PlayStation2 and portable audio and video products?
As I've said before, I believe we will enjoy 100 per cent of the PSP market. In the way that PlayStation revolutionised the TV-based gaming market, we want PSP to dramatically change the landscape for portable, mobile entertainment – whether it's games, music, movies or new forms of entertainment that merge all three. PSP and PS2 are not direct competitors but can comfortably coexist in the user's



entertainment choices. PS2 is limited to the home, PSP is not.

DVD playback was very significant in helping to boost early sales of the PlayStation2. Was video playback seen as a similar way to boost early PSP uptake?
I think that the amazing response to PSP in Japan shows this is more than 'just' a portable games machine but an entertainment technology that enables users to control how, what and where they play, watch or listen.

After the stock shortages of the Japanese launch, have the European and US release dates been put back to allow more preparation time?
As of right now, we've not announced the launch date for the US or Europe – although it may have been by the time this is printed – so it's a bit difficult to answer that question!

Do you expect to have stock shortages for the European launch?
We don't plan to have stock shortages as part of a strategy, but unfortunately it's a fairly likely scenario given the amazing reaction we've had to the machine and the software.

As things stand, Nintendo's DS has an installed base of approaching three million, six times that of the PSP. Is that how you expected the situation to be at this stage?
Given that PSP has only been on the market for 25 days [at time of going to press] and that we've shipped every unit we've made we're extremely happy with progress so far. Every effort is being made to increase supply and try to match the enormous demand.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

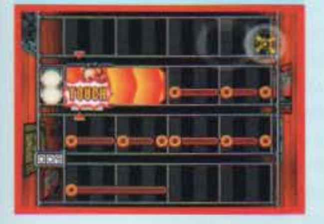
Now playing...

Drakengard



Saving the world never felt so sordid as in Cavia's sociopath simulator. Both the bloodlust of ground combat and the soaring dragonflight can still impress.
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

Daigasso: Band Brothers



Billed as an eight-track music game, *Daigasso* really has 16 – since everyone playing is also laughing in delight. The Christmas medley became an instant office tradition.
DS, NINTENDO

TLOZ: Four Swords Adventures



There are times when it feels closer to a puppy-sim than anything else, as you scamper back and forth digging for treasure and shunting your playmates into the pond.
GC, NINTENDO

Future imperfect

Why you should drop your DS in a puddle



Please, no horrified letters. No PSPs were harmed in the production of this publication and the UMD was fully sterilised in Edge's space-age lab

Two months, two console launches. There may never have been a better time to be a gamer. It's certainly a while since there's been a more expensive time, thanks to profit-grabbing import suppliers. But now the dust has settled. Both the DS and the PSP have been scrutinised and road tested, their games dissected and debated.

And yet, something feels a little strange. Both machines were supposed to change the way we related to the games we play – revolutionising their structure and presentation, evolving who played what and where and for how long. But the odd thing is that, by virtue of how exciting both machines are, it's entirely impossible to gauge what kind of impact they've had.

Playing your GBA on the way to work goes like this: squeeze on train, find seat, play GBA, get off train. Playing your PSP on the way to work goes like this: squeeze on train, find seat, carefully slide PSP out of case, pull out hem of T-shirt and adoringly polish screen. Watch *Ridge Racers* movie. Watch it again. Look up to see person next to you openly staring in amazement and get into a conversation about possible UK release dates. Get off train without actually having played a thing.

The DS is no better – its looks engender such curiosity and its games bring about so much enjoyment that once you get it out it's passed from friend to friend and back again. The hours you rack up on *Wario Ware* are nothing compared to the hours you've spent watching everyone else you know play it.

The problem is that the nature of what both machines are trying to do – to integrate gaming more closely into our daily lives, to make them portable, personal, social, adaptable – can't happen until we start to take them for granted. These machines weren't designed to be a 16-hours-a-day fascination, they were designed to be a 20-minutes-at-a-time diversion. The real face of the revolution isn't last month's gleaming hardware. The real face of the revolution is a PSP with its corners scuffed and scraped and a DS with a cocktail stick for a stylus.

Can you honestly imagine anything better?







Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



RIDGE RACERS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MARCH (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E145

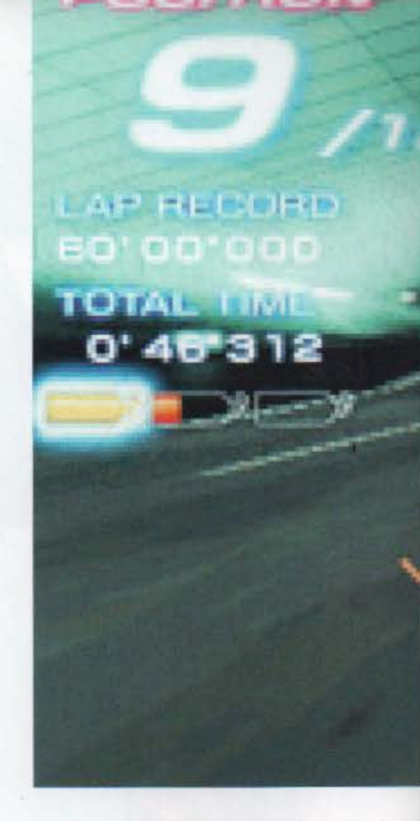


Over-saturated sunset races are a visual highlight, with several reverse courses transformed by a lighting change



The display's sharpness gives *Racers* an impressive sense of distance, with the road distinguishable out to the horizon





There's a wait with any game for the first moment of absolute connection: *Ridge Racers* has it down to 30 seconds into the opening race, as you twist through that bayside corner where a Namco-blue sea stretches out to a Namco-blue sky and an impossibly low-flying airliner sweeps into view. Your car's back end starts its pendulous outward swing, sun glare flashes across Tarmac, the wheels reconcile their directions, the jet thunders overhead towards New Ridge Airport.

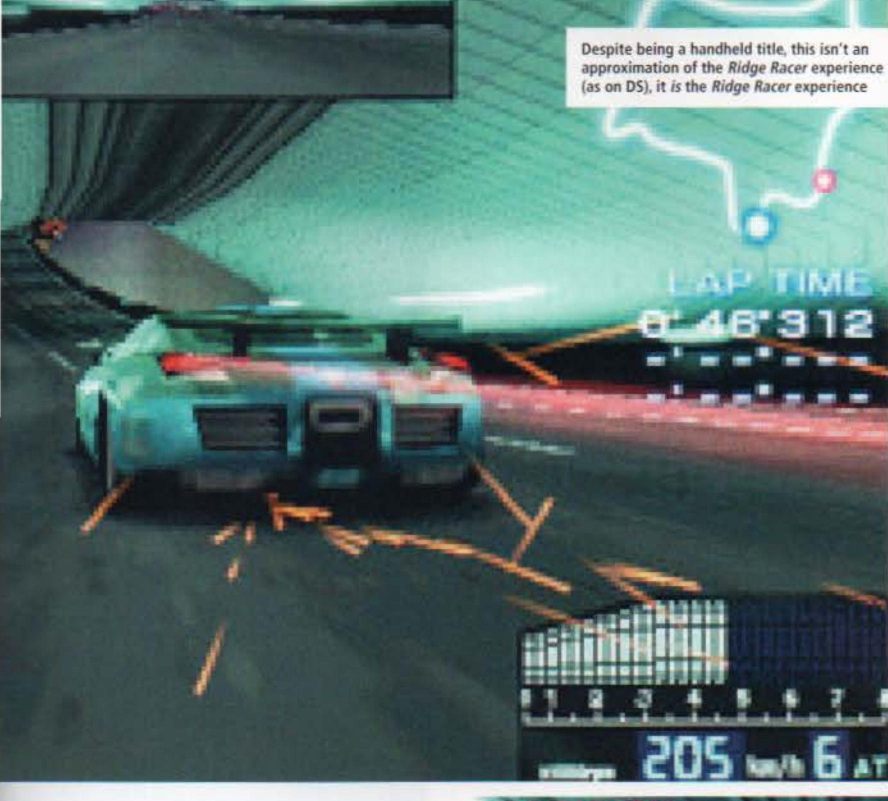
Even if you knew it was coming, it's never felt quite as enthralling as it does here (so much that you may forget the approaching chicane you also supposedly knew was coming). Take first place, and the period between crossing the line and relinquishing control to the replay is exactly long enough to pull a triumphant 1,080-degree spin. This is a game built with an economy of thrill per millisecond in mind, befitting the new handheld context and providing the urgency of *Ridge's* arcade roots that previous home versions occasionally lacked.

And though *Racers* has it all – quantity and quality of cherrypicked historical courses, an immersive audio treatment that captures the sound of speed, an original soundtrack that's arguably the best *Ridge* collection yet and, to test that argument, an additional 12 tracks and six remixes from previous games – it's the drift that brings it together. Owing as much to air hockey as it does to automotive physics, *Racers* distills each tweak its predecessors brought to the mechanic: tight enough that control isn't surrendered on every turn, loose enough that you don't so much take hairpin bends as orbit them.

Overtaking a rival at right angles to their car or traversing an S-bend in a single time-dilating oversteer are experiences as attainable as they are exhilarating, constant reinforcement that the drift is the arcade racer's all-in-one smart bomb and hyperspace. This sensation of invincibility isn't entirely imagined, as provided you enter a drift successfully the game can be relied upon to nudge your car around corners until you steer out – encouraging high-level play where as much of the course as possible is crossed in a continuous slide.

Drift time doesn't just benefit your lap records: it also charges your nitro boosts, a familiar device in initially unfamiliar surroundings. Fears that it would prove eithe token or game-breaking are both unfounded – ultimately, a boost is only as useful as a drift, requiring the same split-second equations of risk and reward, timing and temperance. Ground gained by tearing up a straight can be quickly lost to a determined pursuer (especially one with a boost in reserve), producing exhilarating fakeouts in an attempt to force rivals to go for the trigger first. More effective is the ability to





Despite being a handheld title, this isn't an approximation of the *Ridge Racer* experience (as on DS), it *is* the *Ridge Racer* experience



It's surprising how unobtrusive the seemingly massive screen furniture becomes during play. The ability to scan details with a moment of peripheral attention is more than welcome when the game hits top gear

make up for a wall clip that could have cost the race with a nitro-charged jump back to top speed, or a boost to spur on a howling engine in a painfully sub-200mph hill climb.

Racers' biggest surprise, though, isn't the high-performance mechanics behind its cars, but the sheer volume of the world around them. The centrepiece World Tours eke every last mile out of the courses and connect them beyond being a simple anthology, finding a global diversity between *RRV's* deceptively gentle underpasses and the sine-wave mountain trails of *Rage Racer*. It's this sense of character – a world of empty highways waiting with held breath for green lights and redlines – that ensures even if the



Racers' biggest surprise, though, isn't the high-performance mechanics behind its cars, but the sheer volume of the world around them

Basic tours don't put up much in the way of challenge for experienced players, it doesn't affect the joy of racing.

As the game's speed gently accelerates into the higher car classes and reverse tracks of the Pro tours, though, the margin for any error decreases, proving the more sedate tours to be an essential test drive. At *Racers'* most intense it's dizzyingly fast: a high-class car will reach the point that begins this review five seconds ahead of schedule (and outrun the jet), and races will turn on a moment's hesitation in an aggressive drift with the pack leaders.

But unlike its console predecessors, even the most faint-hearted drivers are likely to see the Pro races – and beyond, as there's an EX series waiting to round out the World Tours – thanks to a generous unlocking schedule that seldom bottlenecks on one particular event. In another departure, it's not necessary to complete an entire event in one sitting, nor is there a limit on the amount of retry attempts. While this may soften the competitive edge somewhat, it's an appreciation of handheld play, and perhaps just as much a show of affection from a game that wants you to fall in love with it all over again, experience all it has to offer.

Despite its importance as a statement of intent for the PSP, or for a franchise which has taken some confused drifts of its own in recent years, *Racers* has an appealing lack of pretension that suggests it has nothing to prove other than that *Ridge Racer* is a delight to play. And it is, with no call for caveat – for a handheld, for a 'remake', for a launch title. It's simply one of the best pure arcade racers to date.

[8]





The announcer may prove more of an acquired taste, but his breathless praise of your every slingshot drift – and a rose-tinted headphones-pleasing reprise of "Somebody's right on your TAIL!" – is delivered with enough genuine fervour to make silencing it seem downright crotchety

Driftism



After an unwelcome pit call to sober reality in *R: Racing*, *Racers* makes a brazen return to the self-referential spirit of the classic *Ridge* series. Classic Namco arcade placards plaster scenery and vehicles alike, car manufacturers sport breathlessly cool/ridiculous monikers, and the World Tour events namecheck the breadth of '90s electronica with increasingly groan-inducing puns. It's good to be back.



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

FORMAT: **XBOX** PRICE: **£40** RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US)**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E140, E145**







New lab benches allow you to break down some items to create others. It sounds like a gimmick but it's handy if you need a couple of computer spikes to hack into a terminal



A lot of people hated with a passion BioWare's original *KOTOR*. The heavy number crunching, turn-based combat and cascading narrative was a turn-off to console gamers more familiar with Square's brand of linear press-X-at-every-encounter RPGing. To others, us included, *KOTOR*'s failure to disguise its PC heritage was a boon. Fortunately, Obsidian has not radically altered the formula, and *KOTOR II* is as deep and multifaceted as the original.

Set five years after Malak and Revan's cataclysmic battle, the player takes on the role of a warrior cast out of the Jedi order by its council members. We're not about to give away major plot spoilers but discovering why the decision was made and uncovering events from the past is clearly the game's central narrative thrust. The plot is not as confidently handled or as revelatory as the original's, but provides ample scope for turning to the light or dark side of the Force.

Sequels always bring with them new bells and whistles, and *KOTOR II* is no different. There are some 60 new Force powers, ten character slots, the ability to go on solo missions, a new influence dynamic, improved environment effects, refined menus, better character animations, larger levels and battles with a greater number of characters on screen. And yet none of these additions address flaws evident in the original. In many ways, in fact, they serve to highlight them.

Criticising a game for long loading times may be obvious, but in *KOTOR II* so much of the plotting, exploration and puzzle solving is interspersed by countless static screens that it can't be overlooked. They dogged BioWare's effort, but here some atrocious level design by Obsidian is hard to forgive. Take Citadel Station, an orbiting space dock around Telos comprising of four separate segments. For over an hour – nearer two if you perform the sub-missions – you're asked to go back and forth between floors acting as little more than a messenger boy. There's barely even any combat to break up the toilsome to-ing and fro-ing. Other areas fare better, but the pacing and balance between combat and chatting is not nearly as well judged.

There's also a roughness that smacks of a team determined to add more content without addressing any remaining issues with the Odyssey engine. Cut-scenes jerk unceremoniously into life with little warning, characters occasionally teleport ten paces ahead (no, not via a Force power), and entering into a dialogue can sometimes provoke strange running-on-the-spot behaviour from the main protagonist. It all detracts from your involvement in the world.



Despite a couple of convoluted plot strands, the narrative has a drive and a dual-layered depth that makes your typical videogame plots seem trite

Main criticisms out of the way, *KOTOR II* still emerges as a fine example of a western-engineered RPG. Its character and item levelling-up pleasures are many, and despite a couple of convoluted plot strands (a Jedi hiding on every planet indeed) the narrative has a drive and a dual-layered depth that makes your typical save-the-world-from-evil videogame plots seem trite. The opportunity to tread the dark or light side of the Force is just as compulsive and, crucially, you never feel as if it's fudged. Play through a second time and you can see your adventure taking a new direction as subplots open up.

Your influence also extends to subtly altering the views and alignments of those in your party. It's an optional extra but one that does pay dividends if you're the type that







More enemies can now attack your party, but things can get clogged up. Often you'll have to cancel an attack then run around the scrum to find a vulnerable opponent

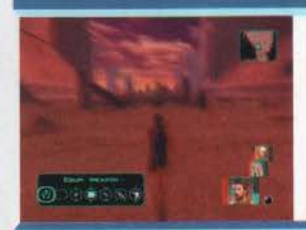
enjoys manipulating characters along with the numbers in your weapon slots. Talk to your diverse (and frankly unbelievable) assortment of crew members for long enough and you can trigger bonus events and revelations along the journey.

Yet structurally the game is too similar to the original, with players choosing from one of several planets to visit after a compulsory opening section. The sense of déjà vu is overpowering and a more interesting tiered structure might be more effective next time around. Some tasks and missions also feel hackneyed, and the Ebon Hawk requiring repairs before it can leave is a theme more familiar than body horror in a Cronenberg flick. As clumsy as some elements feel, it's still difficult to vilify *KOTOR II*. Its strength is in its ability to make you care about your character's fate, and as an RPG package it's as comprehensive as they come. Pazaak is brilliant, the swoop racing patchy but diverting, and the number of subplots mesmerising. It is, however, difficult to know where LucasArts can go with the next game – if it does decide on a trilogy. Repairs to the engine are necessary, and the structure of a character fulfilling their destiny down the light or dark path has surely been exhausted. A fresh take is definitely required. **[7]**



Swoop racing returns, offering a sound method of making extra cash. A jump command, some track undulations and new obstacles have been added but it's still no *Wipeout*

Sprint relief



As you might imagine, there's a lot of ferrying of objects and information between NPCs as well as exploration in *KOTOR II*, and it can be very time consuming. It's pleasing to find that some of this can be, if not avoided, at least reduced by the use of the Force Speed ability. When triggered, movement and combat actions are accelerated allowing you to blur through environments and get to places in double-quick time. Problem is, heavy armour prevents its use, so you have to take it off to get anywhere quickly. It's possible to cover yourself up with modest apparel, but the constant shifting in and out of menus for a change of clothes gets tiresome, leaving you running around in very little for much of the game.



ODDWORLD: STRANGER'S WRATH

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: JANUARY 25 (US), MARCH 4 (UK)
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: ODDWORLD INHABITANTS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E139, E141, E143





In general, outlaws are hard of hearing and forgetful but have excellent eyesight. These well-defined parameters may annoy stealth veterans, but allow the player to act with confidence in any given situation

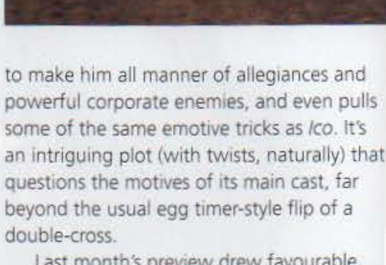


One of many comic moments comes from meeting with these loudmouthed creatures, who sound equal parts Cartman and Yoda. Be sure to steal their treasure; the retort is priceless

Perhaps the greatest thing about *Stranger's Wrath* is just how little the game has been exposed and uncovered during its gestation. Having been passed between publishers and mooted for conversions, *Stranger's Wrath* has snuck its way to release rather quietly in the wake of 2004's software and hardware jamboree.

On playing the game, there's a feeling of freshness, invention and accomplishment, partly down to how little of the game's considerable bulk has been revealed to date. But it's mostly down to something else: *Strangers Wrath* is a magnificent game, not so much a revolution as an evolutionary bound over other combat-heavy console titles. It is Oddworld Inhabitants' most conventional and conformist title yet – a stealthy action adventure – but one that fulfils the potential of that description to the point of nearly subverting the genre when compared to its typical output.

It's a shockingly violent game, from exploding bodies to the sheer brutality of enemy firepower, never revelling in gore but also never shying away from the viciousness of pitched combat. The traditional eco concerns of *Oddworld*'s Abe are lowest on the agenda, it seems. Stranger's own spur is soon revealed to be his need to gather money for a mysterious operation for his 'condition', a thread that goes on



to make him all manner of allegiances and powerful corporate enemies, and even pulls some of the same emotive tricks as *Ico*. It's an intriguing plot (with twists, naturally) that questions the motives of its main cast, far beyond the usual egg timer-style flip of a double-cross.

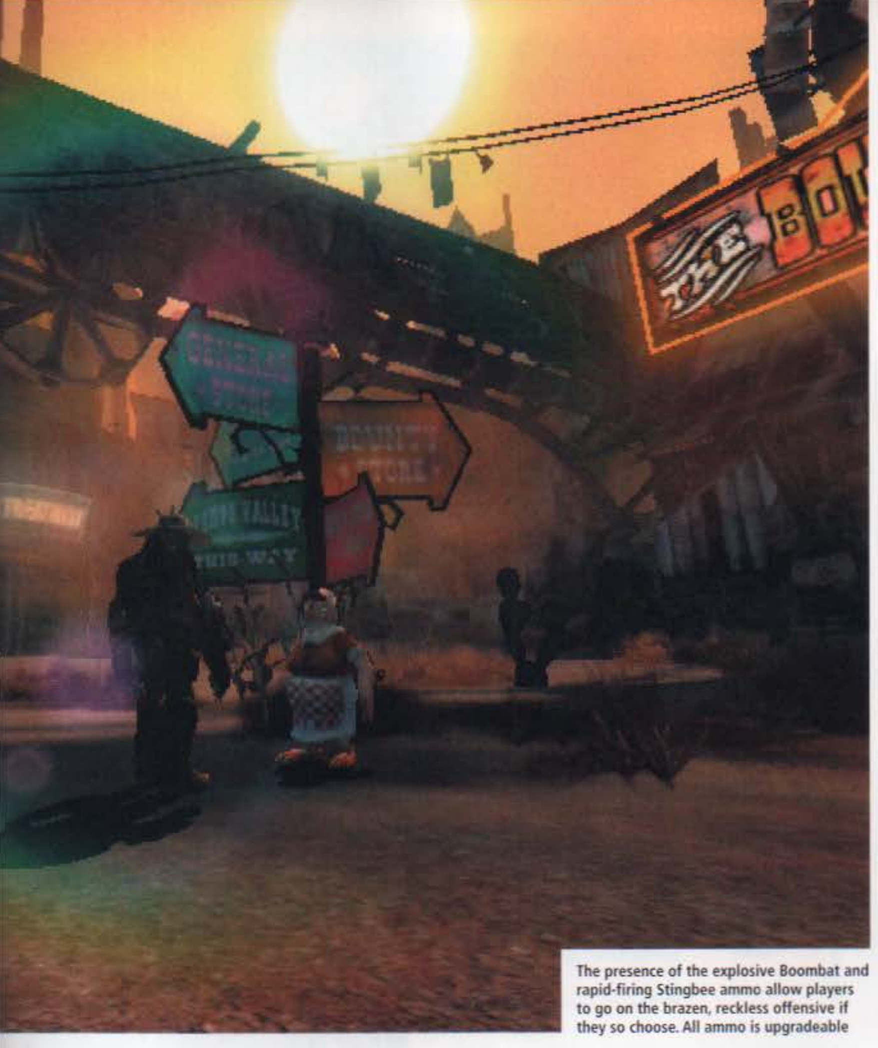
Last month's preview drew favourable comparisons with *Manhunt*: the fuss-free, laid-back stealth parameters, the cutthroat intensity of the combat, the confident and atmosphere-rich style. Upon getting deeper into this particular *Oddworld*, however, a different association soon pushes through: *Halo*. And not just because of a rechargeabl[e] energy bar. Stranger's double-barrelled crossbow and use of imaginative 'live' ammunition swiftly cause favourite dual-wielding weapon combinations to emerge and evolve, and the subtleties quick[ly] become visible. Bolamites (spiders used to subdue enemies in webbing), for example, don't appear to be that far removed from th[e] shock-serving Zapflies (your basic, infinite stock of ammo), until the latter's need to recharge and its tendency to knock enemie[s] backward becomes a tangible, wieldable part of the strategy.

Enemy types feel distinctly *Halo*-like, to[o]. There's not much variety in types of opponent, but they're individual to the extent that differing combinations of them









The presence of the explosive Boombat and rapid-firing Stingbee ammo allow players to go on the brazen, reckless offensive if they so choose. All ammo is upgradeable

Main character Stranger is a bona fide badass, a moody enigma whose heroic reputation is offset by plenty of swearing, spitting and telling jokes with his fists. The game's Wild West theme has been borrowed brilliantly, and Stranger himself remains one of the most memorable and audacious game characters around as well as a well-modelled one

can change things significantly. And that, maybe, will be a problem for some players. Those who were left cold by *Halo*, tackling slightly different combinations of enemy types in slightly different circumstances over and over again, will feel equally dulled here. When the combat is this flexible, energetic and graceful, however, the game deserves as many fans as Bungie's firstperson franchise. *Stranger's Wrath* goes one further, though, by seamlessly blending third- and firstperson frameworks to synergetic effect, the former allowing for some swift and agile movement, and the latter bringing precise, technical combat into the fray.

The first half of the game is concerned with bounty hunting, of capturing notorious outlaws in return for 'moolah', Oddworld's currency. It's in these sections that stealth can be used as a fundamental part of play, allowing for an approach that's anything in between cautious and cavalier; stragglers can be distracted and mopped up before dashing into the remaining pack for some chaotic kills. The inclusion of a quicksave option may seem to be pace-breaking, but allows conscientious baby-step players to shuffle along at their own pace, while removing the fear of experimentation, meaning tactics can be as dull or risky as you like.

The latter half of the game sees Stranger's role twisted around somewhat, moving the pace up a gear and removing the need to bounty outlaws. It's a more action-oriented gallop, but the game compensates by handing you some maniacally destructive ammo types, and segues smoothly into a blazing, breathtaking series of firefights. While the game is seductively pretty in general, its closing portion is phenomenal. It seems like such short months since games like *Fable*, *Sudeki*, *Riddick* and – to some extent – *Halo 2* were praised for pushing graphical envelopes, but there's nothing there that can touch *Stranger's* final straight. However jaded towards the action the player may feel during that concluding stretch, it's buoyed immeasurably by a game world that keeps bettering itself, until some kind of disbelief sets in. This dazzling technical feat is mirrored by some terrifyingly fast loading times, with no in-game loading and restarts from *any* save point in the whole world taking around two seconds.

It's frightening to think of how anything in this current generation can leapfrog it, really. But, ultimately, that's all the more reason to enjoy it

Stranger's Wrath is perhaps too long for its own good, however. When the combat is so continually intense and punishing that, no matter how brilliantly it's realised, it can begin to feel like an exhausting grind. Outlaws keep appearing in their droves, and the need to treat each encounter as its own dynamic set-piece can become draining. Also, some of the later bosses rely on weak-spot activations and attack patterns, and feel like a step backwards when compared to those early bounty hunting-based confrontations, which feel far more manic, malleable, freeform and explosive by comparison.

But perhaps the worst thing of all about *Stranger's Wrath* is just how effortless it feels: everything is so incredibly assured, the game engine never, *ever* creaks despite bearing an unbelievable load on its shoulders, it's actually funny, it's sleekly designed, it's rigged with imaginative characters and fizzes with life. Architecture is of a scale and intricacy rarely seen, mixing *Halo*'s fat expanses with *Metroid Prime*'s panoramic environmental details, all drizzled with Oddworld's slick organic style, giving cause to sightsee and lollygag at every other turn. It's frightening to think of how anything in this current generation can leapfrog it, really. But, ultimately, that's all the more reason to enjoy it.

[9]

Ins and outlaws



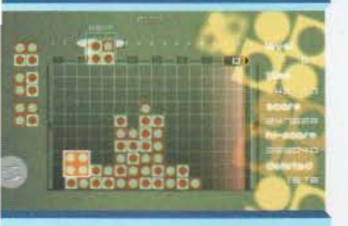
Outlaws can be captured dead or alive, and cashing in live bounties reaps greater cash rewards. There's no serious return for earning plenty of money, however, as the game doesn't rate your humanity any, and offers only a few basic upgrades via the towns' general stores. The bounty hunting aspect vanishes altogether after a certain point, and the whole game steps away from the Western theme and into more industrial territory. After this shift in the tone, enemies can still be subdued and captured, but they're instantly converted into 'ammo chow', replenishing your critters as you go. Dead bodies, however, will rot away quickly if not captured, and if you're a bit overzealous with your riot-upgraded Thudslugs you may just end up obliterating bodies completely.



LUMINES

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI DEVELOPER: Q ENTERTAINMENT

World records



Lumines' soundtrack constantly reinvents itself like it's the last mix tape on earth: while dance music features prominently, it regularly segues into unexpected genres. Licensed tracks feature Mondo Grosso's acid jazz and fresh diva Eri Nobuchika, whose Lights provides the final skin. Early attempts to reach it may convince you that you'd have better luck buying the single.

Puzzle games accompanying a handheld's launch are seldom the most outwardly alluring of titles, but *Lumines* was the exception to end all rules: the only completely original PSP launch title, the first post-UGA offering from Tetsuya Mizuguchi, and an obvious continuation of the producer's mission to turn the transfer of ideas between games, music and art into less of a one-way exchange.

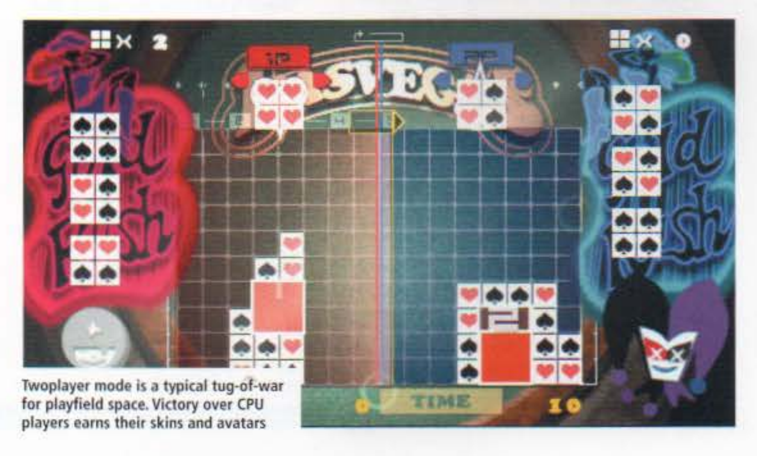
As ever, the basic mechanic is simple. Two-colour 4x4 blocks drop into a widescreen playfield, and must be rotated or arranged to form solid slabs of colour. Rather than being removed instantly, matched blocks wait until a 'timeline' sweeps across, giving a moment to either grow the combo before the line hits, or to use it as temporary scaffolding to prop up new combos formed above it.

While this dynamic is unchanging, other than by accelerated drop speed, the visuals and audio are endlessly mercurial, progressing through a series of 'skins' with complete, often wildly inventive changes in graphic design and soundtrack. Each action has a corresponding skin-specific sound to accompany the backing track, itself advanced through clearing blocks – with longer chains triggering additional effects. At first overwhelmingly hypnotic, second impressions may be that it's more sleep-inducing, too simple to challenge more austere puzzlers on any level other than beauty.

But half of the puzzle with *Lumines* is letting it prove you wrong, and it's outside of the main game that all the pieces are waiting to be assembled. The Puzzle mode's shape-building reveals the patterns possible with basic blocks and how to arrange them without premature disintegration; the merciless speed of twoplayer matches promotes the importance of speed-clearing; Time Attack success hinges on engineering the longest chains with the briefest preparation; and playing single-skin games allows you to learn the tempo of each timeline to pace yourself ahead of it.

Returning to the game illuminated with these possibilities for strategy only strengthens *Lumines*' presentation, making it clear that it's your soundscape and light show, not the game's cover story. The sense of immersion can be broken by playing too intently for score – hold too long on setting up a chain combo and the current soundtrack layer loops like a skipping record – and is regularly interrupted when skins switch in jarring silence, but the experience invites surrender again just as quickly.

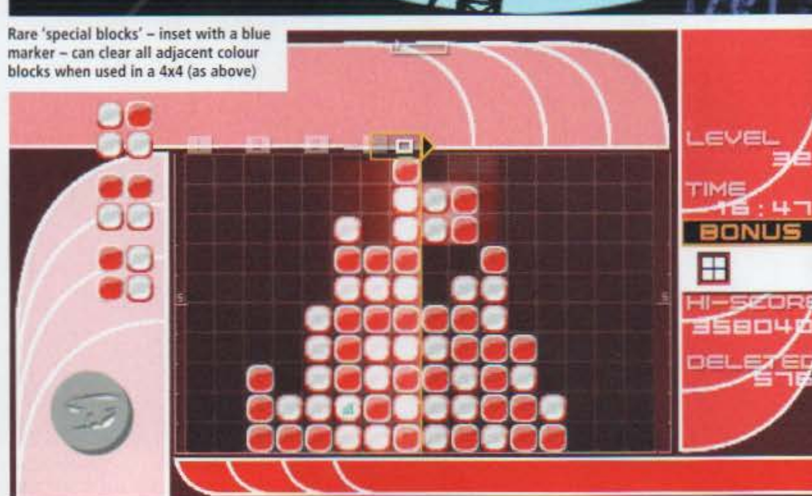
Minor lapses in cohesion and polish drop *Lumines* short of the absolute completeness of *Rez*, but it expands upon its concepts in ways even Mizuguchi followers couldn't have expected. It's a block puzzle that celebrates the joy of light and sound – to the question of whether the PSP can encourage new experiences, it's a resounding 'yes'. **[8]**

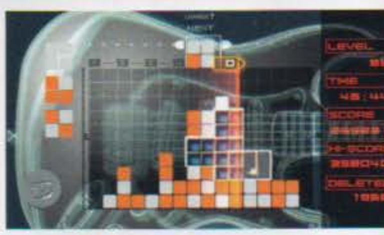


Twoplayer mode is a typical tug-of-war for playfield space. Victory over CPU players earns their skins and avatars



Rare 'special blocks' – inset with a blue marker – can clear all adjacent colour blocks when used in a 4x4 (as above)







The timeline's speed is relative to the current skin's soundtrack. While the slower tracks allow you the time to set long chains, the danger is that you can overfill with matched blocks before the next sweep clears them







KOLLON

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** ¥2,500 (£13)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: CYBERFRONT **DEVELOPER:** MAGIC POT

There are cynics who say that games have nothing new to offer, that they've told all the stories they're going to tell, invented all the interactions they're going to require. The truth is rather more daunting. Games have hardly begun, and the proof of that is *Kollon*. *Kollon* is a colour-coded block-clearing game, and it isn't quite like any other colour-coded block-clearing game you've ever played (unless you happen to have made the acquaintance of *Kollon*'s arcade incarnation). How is that even possible? A grid of squares, a handful of primary colours and a cursor. The number of feasible permutations ought to have been exhausted years ago.

Kollon's twist is that although you clear blocks by grouping together four or more of the same colour, the only manoeuvre you have available to you is to rotate whole blocks of four. Once four matching blocks are connected, they begin to tremble, and you then have a limited amount of time to latch on other matching blocks, extending your combo as best you can. Special arrow blocks can force a combo to continue along a line of mismatched colours in the direction that they point, and these can be combined to set up elaborate domino effects which help to maximise your grading. More traditional bonus blocks act as smart bombs.

In the Vs mode, things become even more fiendish. Clearing more than six blocks at once launches an attack on your opponent: greying out the blocks inside their reticule, expanding that reticule to a three by three square, bloating other blocks to four times their size or, if you get lucky, all three at once. The core simplicity of the game is such that it bears these elaborations well, and is never as confusing as it sounds.

That, unfortunately, is where the good news ends. *Kollon* is a very limited expression of a fundamentally good idea. Although the central mechanic is satisfying, it simply doesn't have much tactical depth – nothing to match, say, the devious forward planning of *Super Puzzle Fighter*. The solo survival mode, which simply challenges you to clear as many blocks as possible, lacks the added challenge of coping with attacks but never quite achieves the hypnotic groove of *Tetris*. Vs mode is blighted by a warning beep that squawks whenever either you or your opponent is close to losing, which is to say all the time. And that's it. No puzzle mode, no multiplayer. Not even a hi-score table, just a carefully calculated grade for your efforts.

Gaming isn't running out of ideas, and neither is *Kollon*. However, the problem of adding your innovations to a genre which so many have perfected before you is that the bar is set dauntingly high. *Kollon*, despite the pleasures it offers, simply doesn't reach it. **[5]**



Vs mode is toughest when your opponent combines attacks, such as enlarging and greying your reticule (top). It's so debilitating that often the best you can do is hold your breath until the effects wear off



Survival mode rewards you with higher grades for setting up extra large combos. Achieving high grades isn't simply a process of clearing as many blocks as possible; you'll need to trigger drop-down combos and use special blocks wisely

Small cry



***Kollon* could hardly have done a poorer job of optimising the PSP's potential. Careful scientific calculations (involving a ruler and the back of an envelope) show that it uses only 12 per cent of the PSP's sumptuous screen as an active play area. Although the overall presentation is glorious, particularly the character work courtesy of celebrated artist Reiko Misumi, the game leaves you squinting at a tiny patch in the centre of the PSP's expansive screen. There's no doubt that the widescreen ratio presents a problem for traditional block tower puzzles, but it's hard to imagine that this eye-watering solution is the best.**



MECHASSAULT 2: LONE WOLF

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 4
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: DAY 1 STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138



No conquest



Aside from the typical selection of Xbox Live modes, *Lone Wolf* features a noteworthy online mode entitled Conquest. It's essentially an elaboration of the deathmatch arena, allowing players to join a house and fight for ownership of an entire solar system. You'll have to choose whether to fortify a defence team within an occupied area or join an attack to grab territory. This has the potential to keep players gripped but, like all MMO experiences, it'll depend on the initial take-up and enthusiasm to set the whole thing alight.

MechAssault was a relative hit for Xbox Live, albeit a default one. With few other Xbox games offering notable online play, it was left to the deathmatch frameworks of early titles *MechAssault* and *Wolfenstein* to entertain the faithful, and as a consequence both garnered more kudos than their singleplayer campaigns deserved.

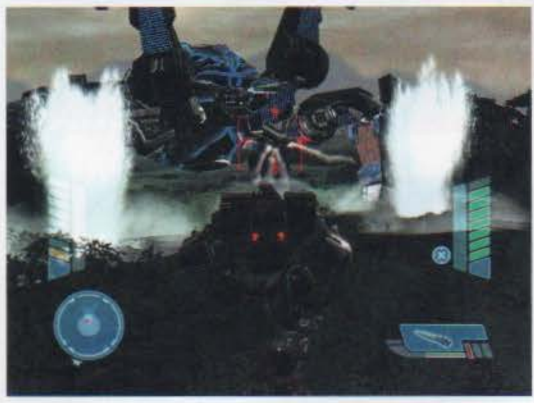
Things have changed, of course. Xbox Live now has its warranted, established superstars, and so *Lone Wolf*'s suite of online options makes the game seem acceptable rather than intriguing. Every link-up permutation – from system link to various online setups – has been included, providing an arena for consuming multiplayer clashes. It's a testament to how well Xbox Live has matured that this accomplished flexibility is no longer a draw in itself.

So it's with the singleplayer campaign that *Lone Wolf* is looking to distinguish itself, and this has been suitably enhanced. Players can abandon their mechs for other vehicles, piloting tanks or VTOL aircraft, and, with the assistance of a battlesuit, can hijack mechs and cling to walls. This elaboration adds several new layers to the big robot battling, but it doesn't bring any extra depth.

Since there's no actual room for customisation, your mech has to depend on finding power-ups, harvested from destroyed ammo caches and fallen enemies, to gain the edge in battle. Mechs are the only interesting offline opponents, but in a way which causes the action to feel stuttered: these encounters are engaging due to the sensation of one-on-one combat, but those of *Lone Wolf* are so ponderous that most fights become wars of attrition, with the winner's spoils being an energy refill to carry them through to the next battle. As a result, the game can't throw enough of them at you to make the skirmishes feel genuinely intense or chaotic.

Environments are destructible, and seeing whole tower blocks tumbling like cardboard shanties is always impressive, but the commonplace use of flat, open ground to create a wide battlefield means that this demolition aspect fades quickly. The mechs themselves, however, are a visual highlight, thrumming with detail and a trio of weapons that feature well-designed, identifiable reticules. There's a wealth of lavish lighting and weighty noise in any given fracas, too, but, once the flashing and wailing has stopped, the absence of any great amount of strategy or texture to the combat hits the game hard.

Lone Wolf, then, is a true successor to *MechAssault*, with its accent placed firmly on Live play. Offline, it's long been succeeded by the more intense, transforming battles of both *Gun Metal* and *Battle Engine Aquila*, meaning that this is a game best enjoyed by completely ignoring its subtitle. **[6]**





The battlesuit can be used to hack and hijack enemy mechs via a short rhythm-action section. Unfortunately, the fact that battlesuits have to be left behind after a successful steal means that it's not possible to hop from mech to mech



***Lone Wolf* offers full clan support, as well as a wealth of online battle modes. Grinder, for example, is a spin on survival mode, where a group of players battle a never-ending stream of mechs until they succumb**





There's enough variety in the mechs to make each one recognisable, from the rear at least. The striking Ragnarc and Atlas are later, heavyweight models that move at a painfully sluggish pace. Meanwhile, unless you've a love for the continuous chug of heavy metal – the musical kind, not the lumbering death engine variety – it's hard not to make killing the music one of your first actions

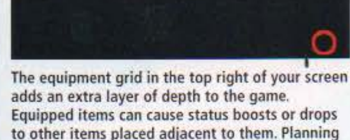


METAL GEAR ACID

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,800
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E143







The equipment grid in the top right of your screen adds an extra layer of depth to the game. Equipped items can cause status boosts or drops to other items placed adjacent to them. Planning a perfect pattern can give you a substantial advantage – assuming the right cards come up

There's something schizophrenic about the *Metal Gear* series. Notorious for the grandiose scale of Kojima's cinematic ambition, it's often overlooked that at its core it is profoundly abstract. The rigidity of its rules, and the discrete, regimented way your actions are divided up around them (wait, move, shoot, listen, watch) means that you could strip away all the realistic window-dressing and still have a game that made sense. It's the reason why the VR missions always worked so well, and it's the reason why a *Metal Gear* card battle game isn't as ridiculous as it sounds.

Almost every element of *Acid* is familiar. Armed with his SOCOM and his cardboard box, Snake stalks the gantries and guard huts of an enemy installation. Dodging metal detectors and security cameras, he lures soldiers to a swift and silenced death. All this action, however, is controlled through your deck of cards, and the complex world is made up of a strict and simple grid. Made up of weapons, rations, stat-boosts and the like, Snake has the option of using a card, or converting it (in most cases) into motion points. Using two or three cards per turn, you have the option of eking out a mini strategic set-piece each move, before waiting patiently (or fast-forwarding impatiently) as the enemies play out their hands.

Starting very simply, the game rapidly progresses in scale and complexity, revealing subtleties in the system not immediately apparent, such as using stealth camouflage, mines and explosive barrels to prepare elaborate booby traps. By the time the levels become daunting in scale and *Metal Gear*'s trademark bosses make an appearance, busking it is no longer enough to get you through. In some cases it's a question of holding your nerve and carefully wrangling your cards until the ones you need come round again. In others, it's the more demoralising process of abandoning the level and reworking your deck – including this time the crucial mine-detector or chunk of C4 you missed so sorely on your last attempt.

The trademark exclamations still govern a large aspect of the gameplay. Some cards let you cancel alerts, so long as you're not in plain sight



It's this latter factor which makes *Acid*'s clumsy camera such an issue. Despite letting you twitch its angle with the analogue slider, and pull out to a top-down view, it's often difficult to get a satisfactory view of the level – and even of Snake if in a tight corner. It makes planning your way around, so crucial in a grid-based strategy game, unnecessarily frustrating. And while the strategies you construct are based on loving and considered reduction of *Metal Gear*'s gameplay, overall *Acid* lacks the depth and completist compulsion that fuels the success of more compelling card battle games.

Despite these limitations, there's no doubting the title's importance. In refusing to let the PSP's home-console-style graphical capabilities dictate the nature of its gameplay, *Acid* is a valuable blueprint for future PSP development. If all the machine's software is thought out with this kind of freshness and clarity, its reputation as a gaming machine will thrive. **[6]**



The cut-scenes are as long as you would expect, but can be fast-forwarded with a clever button combo

Lovely Stunning Design



The game is visually arresting on almost every level. The technical accomplishments of the level and character design are let down a little by their mundanity – there are many, many grey corridors – but *Acid* makes up for it with a gloriously incongruous mix of ultra-modern menu design, exuberant satires on the crassness of advertising and the ethereal and unsettling art from *Zone Of The Enders*' Tsubasa Masao, through which the utterly potty story is told. Even by *Metal Gear* standards, the prospect of a future US president hijacked by Vecuronium Bromide-spraying marionettes is irresistibly preposterous.



Once you trigger combat with a bigger enemy, the game zooms in, giving you a close-up view as you hammer out a beating on your foe. More delicate players may resort to wearing protective gloves by the end of a long session





The bulk of the game is played zoomed all the way out. Although DK looks tiny, you never loose sense of his location



DONKEY KONG: JUNGLE BEAT

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 4
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138



Banana economics



For all the crash, bang, wallop of its gameplay, *Jungle Beat* has at its heart a mechanic which is simple and elegant. The only currency is bananas. Collected from the levels and earned for defeating enemies, they constitute your health. At the end of each level there waits a boss. He has 500 bananas – the more you have, the better a chance you'll have of defeating him. Whatever you have left at the end constitutes your score, and the resulting medals you're given unlock your progress through the game. After years of platform bloat, it's a delight to see a game refine so many systems (health, collectables, score, unlockables) into one restrained mechanic.

Normally, this is a magazine that frowns on flowery, colon-dependent titles, but if we had our way Nintendo would have gone one step beyond. Whatever it says on the box, the true name of this game is *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat: Alpha Male*. No game ever made has flooded you so utterly with testosterone, has left you red, raw and roaring with pride. Kids' stuff? No chance. This is a man's game.

It's a man's game that takes some explaining, however. *Jungle Beat* is based on the DK template Rare established on the 16bit Super Nintendo: densely lush 2D worlds, enemies to slam, bananas to collect, sharks to ride, vines to climb. And you control it all with a set of bongos. Beat on the left bongo to go left, on the right to go right, jump by hitting both, and trigger context-appropriate actions by clapping. It shouldn't work. It should be a novelty bodge job, producing the kind of fleeting amusement felt by anyone who's ever played *Soul Calibur* with a fishing controller. Instead, it's a toweringly satisfying game: varied, precise, demanding and visually dazzling.

Its greatest strength is in the combo momentum. Clapping is key – triggering Kong to punch enemies, spring off plant bouncers, bat coconuts back at bosses and mushrooms to bloom into vast platforms. The game encourages you to launch into extended improvisations, beating out desperate, staccato solos as you thump and tap your way to victory. Combat is a simple process of clapping at enemies in your vicinity, but build up enough of a combo and the camera zooms in, letting Donkey wallop one enemy into another, a move as delicious here as it was in *Viewtiful Joe*.

It works so well because of perfect calibration. Had it demanded more precision from you as you thwacked towards a vine or applauded aggressively at an enemy it would have been frustrating. Had it asked any less, the challenge and replayability would have been lost. As it is, the game is an irresistible rollercoaster, pulling you through some of the juiciest worlds on GameCube. The jungle gleams, bejewelled with fruit and dazzling wildlife. From ocean bed to cerulean sky, from lava cavern to ice palace, this is a game that recreates every videogame cliché with invention and artistry, then throws in settings so wildly creative you'll shout out in surprise.

Donkey Kong has never made so much



As is DK tradition, Donkey Kong can hitch rides on the local wildlife, tapping left and right to drift in the desire direction. The tranquil moments provide a vital breather during some of the more thumpingly dynamic sections

sense as a character, and you revel in the chest-beating glory of powering him throug each level. Game designers talk about emphasising character through dialogue or animation, but his may be the first incidence of a game emphasising it through a control method. Its immediacy means you'll share every inch of his swaggering, gleeful, unstoppable violence. Only the repetition of bosses and the speed with which you'll complete the game undermine what is otherwise an entirely unique pleasure. Ladie and gentlemen, we give you *Jungle Beat*. Drum roll, please.





CHAOS FIELD

FORMAT: DC PRICE: ¥5,160 (£26)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: ABLE/MILESTONE

The old girl just won't lie down and die. If *Chaos Field* really is the Dreamcast's last stand, it'll be a fitting one: all flash, no fury; undersold by forthcoming ports to more active formats; mistaking over-complexity for progression.

Chaos Field is a convenience port from arcade hardware that resembles the Dreamcast's guts. The usual lazy lack of optimisation is there from the start, with an unblockable demo scene stalling the one-more-go momentum – every single game. Twitchy fingers good. Drumming fingers bad.

Presentation grumbles aside, the key references are Taito's *Ray* series of lock-on shooters (the best being *RayCrisis* on PS1) and unsung Saturn shmup *Soukyugurentai*. As well as the standard laser, there's an option to auto-target enemy weak spots and bullets within the ship's preset reach. The twist here is the option to switch between two 'fields' – Chaos and Order. In Order mode, enemies are low-scoring, attack conservatively and leave behind plenty of items.

Chaos mode is the darker, more ferocious parallel where you get to wield the powers. Lock-On will target anything hostile and smother it with a coo-inducing barrage of pyrotechnics. Often, so many of your missiles are flaring and streaking towards their objectives that the action warps down to a mushy crawl. Here's where the *Radiant Silvergun*-style sword is most effective – mopping up certain flavours of bullets when they're at their most sluggish and exposed. The items also power a weedy and woolly protective ghost ship that would have been better as an all-round barrier to encourage a more hit-and-run style.



It may be handy for helping you stay alive, but *Chaos Field*'s slowdown is dramatically soupy even by the standards of a Dreamcast shmup

Each phase consists of two mini-bosses and a final, extra-angry foe ("CAUTIONS!"). In the absence of the usual attack wave/end-of-level firestorm tension release, *Chaos Field*'s forced complexities are crying out for a lighter touch. The field-switching, bullet-mopping and piece-by-piece takedowns quickly feel a bit fiddly and chore-like. Although its surgical approach can be oddly therapeutic, seasoned shmuppers will crave a bit of old-fashioned kill-or-be-killed brutality.

The comedy head-hurty maths of the lock-based scoring system fogs the skies even further. This is a hardcore, score-maximisation shmup through and through, but it could still learn plenty from the purity of *Ikaruga*'s zen-like three-chain/black-white dynamic or *DoDonPachi*'s accessible, don't-miss-anything rule.

A diverting but skeletal rush job with, perhaps, all the love (twoplayer, high-score saving) reserved for PS2. You want boss-rush head rush? Stick to *Warning Forever*. **[6]**



Your ship's lock-on capabilites make for some spectacular visuals, particularly when called upon for boss fights







DYNASTY WARRIORS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: KOEI
DEVELOPER: IN HOUSE (OMEGA FORCE)



The screen-choking sidebar can be switched between the strategic and a radar for the current battle. Absurdly, the most vital statistic – your rapidly dwindling time – isn't included

The selling power of the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise is such that its flaws have been heaped over with relentless statistics upgrades until they become quirks. That history seemed set to make the PSP version the embodiment of an ill-advised, overfamiliar port, and in some respects, that's exactly how it feels – but in others it shows a real appreciation of its new environment.

Most obvious is the portrayal of battlefields as a series of decisive skirmishes. Each scenario is presented as a strategic grid, with the objective to press through to the opponent's home castle within a time limit and around the ebb and flow of the battlefront. Entering an area with an enemy presence initiates battle, and routing the enemy forces – usually taking between two and five minutes – strengthens your army's influence on surrounding areas. It provides a welcome alternative to the battle fatigue of previous games, and introduces more deliberate strategies of sapping enemy resources before committing to button-mashing – though the time limit prevents straying too far from the sequence of conflicts.

Another introduction is a bodyguard system, where up to four sub-generals can be assigned to your character before combat. They can be called on with the D-pad to bestow a special ability, such as slowing enemies, increasing attack power, or replenishing life – replacing almost all power-ups in the field. Without a healing subordinate, the only way to replenish your life is to visit storehouse areas on the map – at the cost of time.

But for a promising set-up, it collapses in the heat of battle. Nearly a full third of the PSP's screen is filled by a clumsy status display, clipping the peripheral vision that would have been so useful in the chaos of a *Dynasty* scrum. Even with concessions of a drastically reduced draw distance and crowd numbers, you're constantly attacked from behind or off-screen, wedged between your own generals and scenery, or assaulted by phantom platoons that pop in and out of existence. Penultimate battle areas are usually afflicted by choking slowdown, and more disconcertingly the game occasionally fails to register button presses – prompting a thrill of horror that the PSP face buttons cannot withstand *Dynasty*-grade mashing.

If some of these flaws – quirks, if you will – smack of a rushed development, others will be entirely familiar to series veterans, who will take them on the chin in the undeniably addictive pursuit of scattering soldiers like so much lacquer-armoured confetti. The unfortunate situation for *Dynasty Warriors PSP* isn't just that it's more of the same, but that it feels like it could have been so different. **[5]**



Scything down enemies levels up your attack power for the current battle, allowing you to build it up on fodder before going for generals



POCKET KINGDOMS: OWN THE WORLD

FORMAT: N-GAGE PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NOKIA DEVELOPER: SEGA

Pocket Kingdoms is an MMORPG. Except it's really an MMMORPG, because it's a mobile MMO. Except it's really an MMMMORPG, because it might be the most menu-dependent RPG ever made.

Pocket Kingdoms is set in Ulgress, a fantasy world which imagines what it would be like if the online culture of l33t-speaking, PK-collecting griefers was real. It's a real shock to the system – the cordial chivalry of traditional Japanese RPGs subverted with hilariously vulgar American geekery. The next surprise is that there's no active component to the game at all: battles are fought out automatically with the player simply spectating, and exploring is accomplished through selecting the explore option from a menu and waiting for a new destination icon to pop up on your map screen. The thinking behind this design is very sound – it allows you to play the game second by second, never having to worry that you might get killed if you get distracted, never having to hang about waiting for someone on the other side of the world to make a decision. The net result, however, is a rather uninvolving experience.

The problem is that the menu design and control scheme is simply too cumbersome: requiring you to scroll endlessly back and forth through hypnotically slow menu screens, the game fails to take advantage of the N-Gage's 12-button layout to offer any shortcuts. The strategy game the menus give you access to – form a party, set their attack pattern, craft new weapons and gradually evolve them into more fearsome fighters, appoint defence parties and arrange environment bonuses – is solid and appealing, but the endless inventory management and repetitive nature of play distances you from a lot of the fun.



Menu screens like this are where you spend most of the game. The inventory system is particularly poor – making you manage every item in your 250-slot inventory singly rather than in batches



The battle screens are where you get a glimpse of how varied and lavish Ulgress really is. The battles themselves are well animatated and a good chance to study how well your unit choice and tactical approach play out in practice

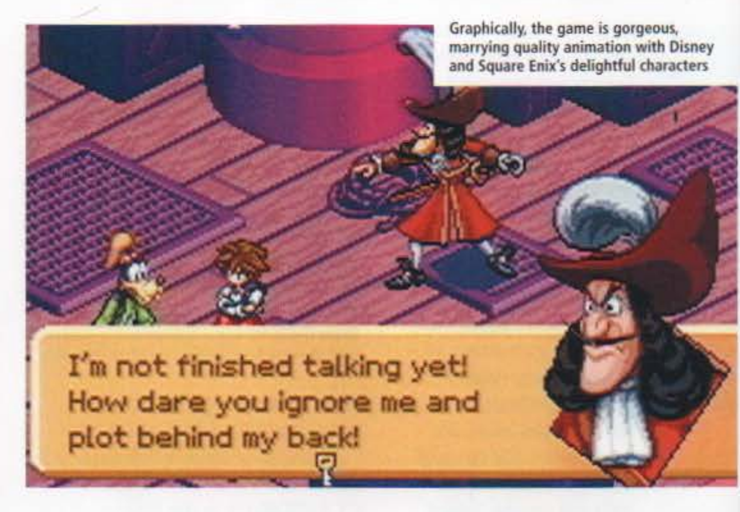
Online and offline play are functionally identical, although moving online means your battles become ranked on the impressive *Pocket Kingdoms* website, which allows players you've vanquished to check out your party rosters and broadcasts news reports of all your latest battles courtesy of their disturbingly Anglophone automated newsreader. Despite having no communication or sense of connection with your human opponents, online play is remarkably more stressful than offline, and it's hard not to hold your breath as you watch the battle play out and your careful set strategies win through. However, a large part of the stress comes from the seemingly arbitrary system which governs whether injured team members are classified as 'out' (from which they can be healed) or 'pwned' (which means they are lost from play forever).

The strangest thing about *Pocket Kingdoms* is how much it feels like a launch title. As proof of the N-Gage's online potential, it works very well. As a game it suffers from too many compromises, but a commitment from Nokia to a *Pocket Kingdoms 2* would be a promising development indeed. **[5]**



KINGDOM HEARTS: CHAIN OF MEMORIES

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH (UK)
PUBLISHER: BEUNA VISTA GAMES DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E141



Graphically, the game is gorgeous, marrying quality animation with Disney and Square Enix's delightful characters

Sequels tend to follow a set pattern – rehash gameplay, reinvent story. *Chain Of Memories* turns that pattern upside down by repeating the story of the first game but replacing the gameplay with a card-battle system.

In order to escape accusations of being a redux-lite, the memories of all narrative players bar protagonist Sora are wiped. This isn't as bad an idea as it might sound – the characterisation and scenarios of the original are strong enough for a second exploration.

The card element covers both the fighting engine and access to each sequential area. Locked doors must be opened by playing cards collected from battles – the card you pick affecting the type of enemies that will be found on the other side. Within the microcosm of battle, the card element is clearly intended to add strategy to the previous button mashing, and its implementation is well thought out. You construct a deck of cards from various attacks, spells and Disney-themed 'summons' and then play hands as you run and jump in realtime around the battle screen. Each card is numerically graded from zero to nine and (generally) should an enemy play a card with a higher value against yours, your attack will be blocked.

However, the difficulty is pitched so that once you assemble a deck of high-numbered cards, it's possible to simply hammer through them from start to finish, chipping away at your foes' energy with little need for strategic card selection or danger of death. This cripples the strategy and makes careful battle planning an option rather than a necessity. It leaves the game feeling rather lightweight, so as compensation the number of encounters is ramped up and up, and this emphasis on quantity rather than substance is an imbalance from which the game never really recovers.

This is more than just a cynical cash-in conversion, but in pitching itself as a kind of '1.5' iteration it's never clear if the game is a necessity or a distraction for devotees of the *Kingdom Hearts* universe. For all but the most ardent follower, its off-target execution will imply the latter. **[5]**





At each level-up screen you have the choice of boosting your HP, your CP (the value of cards you are allowed to carry in your deck) or learning a new attack comprising of a card combo



VAMPIRE CHRONICLE: THE CHAOS TOWER

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The *Street Fighter* series has recently received an anniversary feting on the PS2, but it's that fighter's supernatural twin that gets the spotlight of Capcom's first PSP toe-dip. If *Vampire* (*Darkstalkers* to western arcades) may be a tournament-play featherweight compared to the *SF* line, it punches far above its weight in terms of art direction – reason enough to be interested in seeing its oft-plundered characters presented in the far more flattering light of the PSP's screen.

Unfortunately, what could have been a comprehensive, if latecoming, introduction to the series for new players is slightly spoiled by a lack of guidance. Though the ability to mix overall game rules and individual character modifications from across the *Vampire* games will be a playground for series devotees, those unfamiliar with the nuances of these changes face a Go Directly To GameFAQs mentality at odds with the freshness of the format.

Completists, too, may be disappointed to find that, as a port from a Dreamcast special edition of *Vampire Saviour/Darkstalkers 3* rather than a custom-built collection, it's a chronicle with some hefty tracts of history missing – such as the first two games. The Arcade mode only offers the *Saviour* cycle, regardless of your selected character's chosen game and style; the original memorable stage backgrounds, too, are entirely absent. While clearing the Arcade mode will unlock the historically-correct ending sequences, it's bemusing to view the aftermath of battles you can't play.

The game's PSP-exclusive addition, the Tower mode, pits your chosen team of three characters against a series of one-round survival bouts. Life bars carry over to the next fight, and a downed character is out for good, so careful sizing up of opponents is required as enemy AI becomes steadily bolder (and more liable to play cheap with special moves). Successes in the Tower fights unlock an expansive illustration gallery, but the mode feels undernourished in comparison to the character-building offering from the PS1 *Saviour EX/Darkstalkers 3* port: a combination of the two could have greatly increased the Tower's appeal.

Even if the overall package is less than the sum of its parts, an arcade-perfect port of *Vampire Saviour* is impressive enough alone, and the PSP's screen definition infuses the visuals with their original, unmistakable vibrancy. As an object lesson in the viability of high-quality 2D on the console, its success is only tempered by the sense that it's a token offering rather than a throwing down of the gauntlet on a new platform. *Vampire* deserved this restoration, but more than that it needs new blood. **[6]**





New visual elements (above and bottom of page) are scrappy in comparison to the original style



Full widescreen (left) is impressive, though it stretches and blurs the graphics to fit. A pixel-perfect bordered option is also available



MR DRILLER DRILL SPIRITS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US/JP), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Since its inception over four years ago, the *Mr Driller* series has seen a dramatic evolution. What began as a reed-thin quick-fix arcade game has accumulated new characters, multiplayer games, and a raft of innovative singleplayer puzzle modes. Unfortunately, nearly all the sequels featuring these additions have remained in the east – most criminally 2003's *Drill Land* – leaving most westerners wondering what some importers were so worked up about.

Drill Spirits delivers a competent but not outstanding selection of these innovations. Players familiar with *Mr Driller 2* will recognise the Mission Driller and Time Attack modes, but DriStone mode, a new series staple, is less frantic and more calculative – each drill costs one point of oxygen (versus having oxygen steadily deplete), so wanton thoughtless racing downward leads to a quick death. Hidden within the blocks, however, are DriStones, power-ups that can variously increase oxygen, destroy all blocks of a certain colour and so on, essential for making the longest hauls to your goal. This subtle gameplay change transforms each round into a carefully plotted excavation, and singlehandedly adds considerable depth to the title.

Pressure Mode adds a giant, Destroyer Drill constantly bearing down upon you from above, which must be destroyed by collecting and firing power capsules back up the well as you hurriedly descend downward. It's a welcome addition, but lacks the finesse of the singleplayer variations the series has previously provided, and reads more as a simple attempt at creating a game element that occupies the DS's upper screen.

Drill Spirits makes other lacklustre attempts to utilise the DS's features. The stylus can be tapped to drill in any direction, but in high-stress situations the imprecision is often disastrous. Some menus are touch controlled, while others, like the in-game pause menu, require button presses.

Importers should also note that, due to time constraints, both single-cart multiplayer and the DriStone mode were removed from the US version. *Drill Spirits* is a well-rounded introduction to the series, but falls far short of its greatest successes. **[6**

The overall portrait presentation of the DS's dual screens is the perfect fit for *Mr Driller's* mineshaft mechanics. Seeing your route down the level stretch up above you is an impressive sight







***Mr Driller* was always a stressful gar – its candy colours belying the threa of crushing suffocation. The Destroy Drill only increases the pressure**


PRINCE OF PERSIA

TIME EXTEND

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE DATE: **2003**



No guns, no gore, all glory: the prince who broke the mould, and the sequel that broke our hearts

The dagger plunges into the cold blaze of the glinting sand and you have a moment to breathe. A moment to sense the shapes of all the things you won't have time to think about: the consequences of what you've done and the consequences of what you haven't; the price of what you've lost and the price of what you're yet to find; the things you've changed and the things that won't change back. Before the shapes have time to form it starts, pulling you back past every shout of wonder, every splash of sudden sand, every breathless ache of victory: faster, faster, faster. And then the world is as it was, cool and quiet as raindrops, and you can take another breath. But by the time it leaves your lungs it has begun again – the same midnight race, the same moon-bleached balcony. A different prince. A different you.

It's the hallmark of every good videogame – the urge to go back to the beginning as soon as you get to the end. *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* goes one better: it restarts the story for you as soon as it reaches its climax. It's not a complicated tale – the prince, driven by his greed for glory, is tricked by a scheming vizier into unleashing the Sands of Time, which kill everything they touch. They can't be stopped, only contained, so the game charts his mission to turn their power against them and rewind time to a point before his fatal mistake. It's hardly a spoiler to say that he succeeds, and when he does, the game plays it straight. You return to the opening scene of the game, and no one but the prince knows what so nearly happened next. All that remains is to take steps to safeguard the Sands, and the prince can sleep easy. Simple.

So simple that it's easy to overlook how beautifully you've been tricked. The game is transparently honest with you from its very first moments. The prince slips from a moonlit balcony into the warm glow of a bedroom. We see a woman sleeping, hear her gasp. "You may wonder who I am," says the prince, silencing her. "Sit down, and I will tell you a tale like none which you have ever heard." What could be plainer? But gamers have been trained for years to mistrust cut-scenes; what gamers trust is action. And so, once they gain control of the prince, the bedroom and the tale-telling is dismissed or forgotten. Shrugged off as a hackneyed narrative device for setting the game's fantastical scene.

The better the game and the purer the connection between the player and the action, then the greater the sense of nowness. We even call it 'immediacy'

Games don't handle time very well – saves and deaths, reloads and pauses see to that. What games communicate convincingly is the now. The better the game and the purer the connection between the player and the action, then the greater the sense of nowness. We even call it 'immediacy', complimenting the game on its ability to replace the passage of time with an eternal, continual present. So even if a game tells you to your face that this action which feels so urgent, this danger which feels so pressing, is actually all done and dusted, something which the participants have converted into anecdote, it's still hard to adjust. Even



TALKING FIGHT

Of those that didn't enjoy *The Sands Of Time*, the most numerous were those who hated the combat. A poorly judged difficultly spike during the battle against your sand-infected father meant many people abandonded the title, never to return. Throughout the game, fights were far too drawn-out, respawning enemies allowing you no way to guage your progress through the fight.

Other than this error of judgement, however, *TSOT*'s combat is masterfully simple. Enemies were discretely colour-coded – red if they could be vaulted, blue if not – and those that could were then vulnerable to a instant-kill combo that substantially speeded up the longer battles. The forgiving auto-target meant spectacular moves could be performed with ease, and the sand-guzzling Haste special attack remains astoundingly satisfying and gratifyingly effective.

the prince's asides ("Do you wish me to leave before finishing my story?" he asks, shocked at your audacity in selecting 'Quit' from the menu) just seem like cheesy conceits, window-dressing for a self-conscious story.

If you ask them now, plenty of people say they saw it coming. At the time, most weren't so prescient – their memory of the game being rewritten by nostalgia as surely as the prince rewrote his past. They were the lucky ones, for the moment of realisation waiting for them at the end of the game was like the finest unlockable ever imagined. For most of your adventure, your only companion – the only other human creature – is Farah, the princess of the kingdom your father's army has ransacked. She is haughty and suspicious, and the prince responds in kind, taunting her with an archness that seems rather overdone: "Skinny little thing, aren't you," he jibes, as she wriggles through yet another crack. Their trials bring them together, of course, though not without mishap and mistrust. Eventually, they consummate their attraction in a sumptuous bathhouse, choked with steam and scent. They are threatened, rescued, separated, reunited. And then Farah dies. The prince, who has used his control over time to rewind himself from countless gruesome deaths, stands helpless over her crumpled corpse.

The *Prince Of Persia* series has always done flesh and bone very well. The excellence of the animation, the fluidity of the motion makes its characters human in a way few games







The prince's sand-collecting finishing move is a fine example of the subtle balance that was built into the game's combat. Dazzlingly pretty, it also allowed the camera to perform some of its more spectacular showboating

achieve. In *TSOT*, this physicality extends to give Farah and the prince a tangible sexuality. You may have seen nothing more than a hint, but the game has made it plain that these are people who have loved each other, emotionally and physically. Now one lies dead at the feet of the other. But the prince is a hero, and a greater wrong must be righted than the death of his lover. And so the prince, battered and bereaved, stabs his dagger into the cold heart of the sands and in a moment, everything that is, wasn't.

Scenes from his adventure flash before you as you rewind to the beginning, but this full circle doesn't signal an ending. The evil vizier must be executed, the Dagger of Time protected. And so the prince sets off to find Farah and warn her. As he enters her bedchamber, he finds the woman he last saw dead alive, safe, asleep. But as she opens her eyes, you remember that she will not know him. "You may wonder who I am," says the prince, softly. "Sit down, and I will tell you a tale." As he says these words, your mind races back to every nuance of the story your actions have helped to tell. The teasing words which sounded so overdone all those hours ago take on a subtle charm when you realise they are being recounted direct to an indignant, uncomprehending Farah. The moments of intimacy become even more charged when you know that he's describing every touch to a woman who can't understand why this stranger seems to know her inside out. It's a beautiful and elegant trick.

This reversal is what makes you want to do some time travelling of your own, rewinding to the start of the game so you can hear the tale again, only this time with Farah's ears instead of your own.

The words won't change, and nor will your actions. The palace grounds will remain the same and identical traps will hiss down identical corridors, but the story will change because you have changed.

The real story is that TSOT should have changed the way games are made forever, and it hasn't. When it arrived, it felt like a revolution. Now, time seems to have reset

But the tale of Farah and the prince, however bewitching, isn't the real story of *TSOT*. The real story has the same shape – an extraordinary adventure that nearly changed the world, but in the end left us back where we started – but it isn't about fictional characters. The real story is that *TSOT* should have changed the way games are made forever, and it hasn't. When it arrived, it felt like a revolution. By resuscitating a stagnant genre – the 3D platformer – it formed a blueprint for how to build a future for games on the very best foundations of the last 25 years, of how to streamline and modernise everything that's precious in gaming's heritage. And yet, now, time seems to have reset. Now, it seems unlikely to have the influence it deserves, and the proof of that is evident in its sequel, *Warrior Within*.

Warrior Within preserves the movement which is the core component of *TSOT*'s excellence. A year on, it's still extraordinary. Graceful, muscular, precise and forgiving, it revolutionised expectations of how liberating a 3D space could be. The whole game became a giant climbing frame, a big-top extravaganza where you got to be the star turn and the enraptured audience rolled into one. With this key feature maintained, it was fundamentally impossible for *Warrior Within* to be a bad game.



PACE MAKERS

When discussing his plans for the sequel, executive producer Yannis Mallat made clear his intention to 'fix' *TSOT*'s pacing. Feeling that the first game was too sectional – fight, then explore, then puzzle, then fight again – *Warrior Within* was designed to mix the three elements into each other. For many who loved the first game, it seems a curious decision. Mixing those elements more evenly together inevitably creates a more monotone result. In comparison, *TSOT*'s pacing shone, giving the game a pronounced dynamic. Intense settings such as the elevator fight gave you nothing to worry about except staying alive, and the dreamy tranquility of the underground reservoir focused your mind so fully on spatial puzzles that emerging back into the world of bright sunlight and violent hostility was a delicious shock.









The sand people, with a glint in their eye to match the one in their gaping, bloated bellies, make the violence feel rewardingly visceral without resorting to bloody gore



The long-range camera setting is crucial for puzzle solving, but also for appreciating the splendour

But in almost every other respect, it turned back the clock *TSOT* had pushed forward.

The Sands Of Time is an astonishingly simple game, lean and economical. A ten-hour trip, it pulled the player along a single line. Close your eyes and you can see your path through the whole game as one continuous, golden thread – looping out of windows and across courtyards, down wells and twining around traps. At a time when most games are fighting to boast about their replayability, branching narratives and ample unlockables, *TSOT* said simply: here is the game. Begin at the beginning. Fight to the end. And then you will have seen everything we have to give you, everything you paid for.

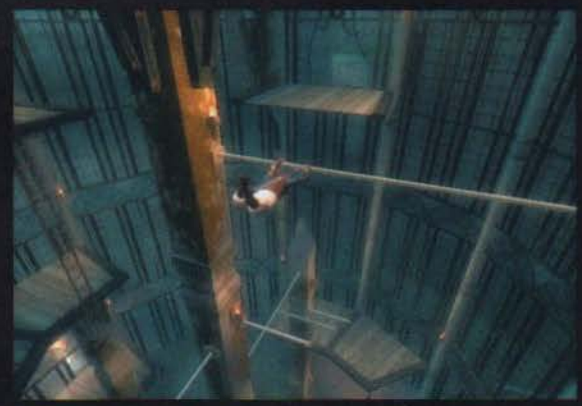
The mechanics are equally stripped down. You are a prince with a sword, and you move through a world of water and sand. Water is life and sand is death, and you'll need both to survive. There is nothing to collect, no complex armoury to complete. The rigour of the logic behind the system gives the game a cohesion which is noticeably lacking in *Warrior Within*. In *TSOT*, your enemies are infected with the Sands of Time, which it is your goal to recover. Killing them lets you collect the sand, and the more you collect, the more powerful the dagger becomes. *WW* takes the same system and twists it, losing its simplicity. Time powers mysteriously become available as you travel through the palace's portals. Enemies contain sand which you can still collect, despite no longer having a dagger to do it with. The same sand has conveniently accumulated in jars and barrels which dot the palace, forcing you into the Neanderthal game behaviour that *TSOT* had left behind – 'me need, me smash'. Bonus chests dot the audience chambers and vaulted dungeons, ready to bark out 'New Artwork Unlocked!' in the event of you ever becoming sufficiently absorbed to forget you were playing a videogame.

The contrast between the games is not accidental. *Warrior Within* set out to improve on *TSOT* and it tried to do so by listening to gamers. What gamers said was, 'Make it more like other videogames! We want to unlock things! We want combos! We want collectables!' But there's a problem with listening to gamers and it's this: the ones that shout the loudest are the smallest minority. And even if a developer could find a way to listen to every single gamer's preferences individually, they'd still only be hearing from a small sector of gaming's potential market: many more people do not play games than those who do. What *TSOT*, with its staunch purity, hazy beauty and un-videogameness offered was something for people who don't like what's already available.

Warrior Within set out to improve on TSOT and it tried to do so by listening to gamers. What gamers said was, 'Make it more like other videogames! We want to unlock things'

The same process happened with the aesthetic. Both *TSOT* and *WW* are fantastic pieces of design. Imaginative and disciplined, they create worlds that are both consistent and consistently beautiful. But *WW*'s world of gloom and grit is a world we've visited before. *TSOT* was a revelation in billowing silk and creamy marble, splashed with the colours of wine and jewels. Nor is it just the world – *TSOT*'s sophisticated characters have been pulled back into the realm of videogame convention. The prince has lost his aristocratic flair and his gentle English accent. The moment in *WW* when he snarls "YOU BITCH!" is the moment he ceases to be an individual and becomes a cipher, a new skin to slip over every other identikit hero you've ever played. The females fare no better, losing Farah's womanly sensuality in a quest to sex her up with a painted-on thong and breasts like grapefruit. It's a desperately disappointing step back from the leap that *TSOT* took by demonstrating so emphatically that games can portray female (and male) sexuality in a way that isn't degrading, adolescent and ugly.

This isn't a question of aesthetic snobbery. There will be many who prefer the grittier look of *WW* to the matinee-idol excesses of *TSOT*, just as there are some who cursed and some who cheered when they heard of the involvement of Godsmack. Nor is it a criticism of the designers' intentions. However welcome more of the same would have been, *TSOT 1.5* would have been an unambitious and ultimately self-defeating project. Changing the story and evolving the prince's personality to reflect the



The dizzying heights of the birdhouse is one of the most fondly remembered locations in the game, and the place where *TSOT*'s circus inspiration is the clearest

horrors he's endured is a laudable way to approach a sequel. The frustration is that instead of moving the game forward, it moved it back. *WW* showed us a game world we already knew would work. *TSOT* showed us that games could do things we didn't know they could; it expanded the horizons, offering something genuinely different.

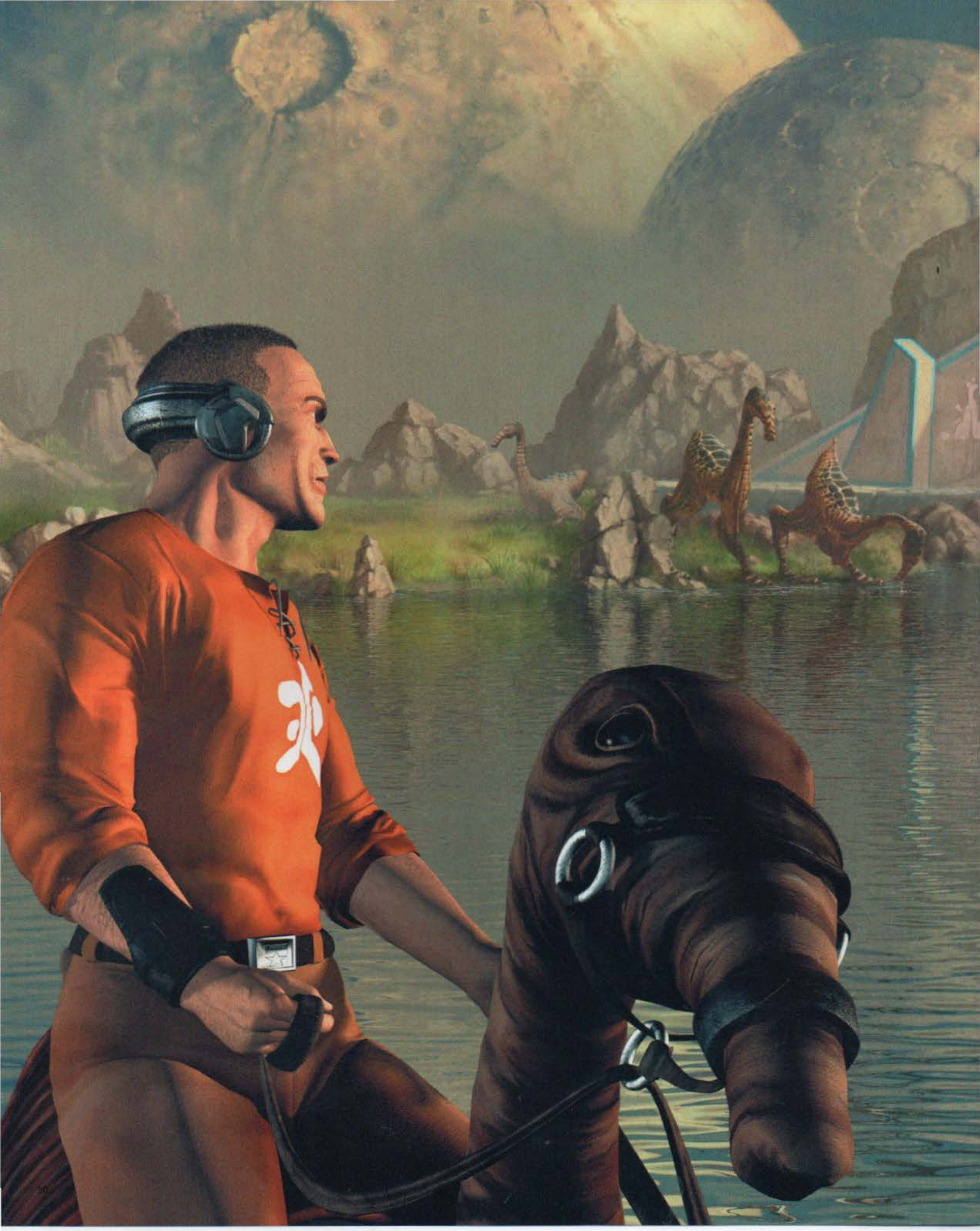
A year on, those horizons are shrinking back. 3D platforming is not experiencing a glorious renaissance. The industry is looking inwards, relying on men, guns, cars and crime to appease its core market. Sex remains an unmentionable taboo, with little on offer beyond Larry's leisurely knob gags and an endless parade of 'enhanced' female characters in impractical underwear. Games are becoming ever more bloated, blindly trying to satisfy the illusory demands of an audience who only finish every tenth title they buy. *TSOT*'s slow sales mean that, despite critical acclaim and continuing popularity, its innovations are considered a failed experiment: rewind, rewrite, start again. Had it stormed to Christmas number one, this year's Hype section might have looked very different. As it is, the stronger retail performance of *Warrior Within* (and the whooping 100 per cents awarded it by certain elements of the press) determines a more likely future direction for gaming: macho, bloody and moody.

It is perhaps as it should be. There is nothing inherently wrong with men, guns, cars or crime. In the last few months alone, games of true excellence have been released which create sparkling and unexpected experiences from those simple, staple ingredients. And it means *TSOT* doesn't have to suffer the indignity of a dozen clumsy clones, diluting its brilliance and fudging its simplicity. Instead, *TSOT* hangs suspended, a moment of gaming magic preserved in gleaming amber. And there it will stay forever, untouched and unspoiled, waiting for you to come and listen again. "Sit down," it says to you, softly, "for I have a tale to tell, like none which you have ever heard..."



PRINCE'S PROGRESS

The *Prince Of Persia* sales scandal was one of the juciest bits of game journalist gossip at the end 2003. Despite widespread acclaim, the game barely made a dent in the all-formats Christmas charts, entering at a miserable 33. An exclusivity deal with Sony meant that only the PS2 version launched before Christmas, and despite print and TV advertising, Ubisoft was unable to generate much of a buzz about the game. However, the game went on to perform strongly: it was almost immediately discounted on PS2 and the cheaper price, along with Xbox, PC and GC versions, bolstered sales enough to reach 2.4 million by the end of April. It was an impressive comback, but one thoroughly eclipsed by the 1.8 million units *Warrior Within* (above) sold in its first two weeks on release.



THE MAKING OF... OUTCAST

Oddball, eccentric and celebrated as one of the PC's greatest adventure games, Outcast lived up to its name and created a minor legend

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INFOGRAMES** DEVELOPER: **APPEAL** ORIGIN: **BELGIUM** RELEASE DATE: **1999**

Silly words are one of the hazards of science fiction, and *Outcast* is chock full of multi-syllabic names, places and giant alien ostriches. Ask a veteran of the game the first thing that they remember about it and these contrived concatenations of vowels will often come up. That *Outcast*'s characters had to pronounce quite so many awkward names has become a joke among PC gamers, making you feel like a Klingon dictionary was just around the corner.

But such absurdities were just one facet of one of the most ambitious attempts to create a cogent, living and breathing world for players to explore at their leisure. Because the second thing an *Outcast* player will remember is the sheer scale and the limitless freedom the game supplied. Its many different lands, from desert to swamp to icy tundra, were utterly free to roam, but structured enough to set the player on the road of an epic quest to save both his colleagues and the entire world, as well as fixing some problems back home on Earth. Despite the fact that a black hole was eating their homeworld, players could take their time to explore this new planet and to build up a reputation among the peasants and rebel clans for whom our hero, Cutter Slade, was something of a messiah. *Outcast*'s towns, villages and alien wildernesses remain one of the outstanding visions of what PC gaming could and should be like. The game took an unprecedented open-ended approach to a serious sci-fi universe, while simultaneously allowing a storyline to emerge through the player's interaction with complex AI. A rare feat indeed.

"I think it was the first game with an open-ended 3D immersive world that the player could explore at his own convenience"

One the founders and game designers from that original Appeal team was **Yves Grolet**. A veteran of the French videogame industry, having started out as a programmer for Ubisoft at the age of 19, he went on to jointly found the development house in 1995, working on *Outcast* until its release in 1999. In 2002 he launched his own company, Elsewhere Entertainment. Clearly *Outcast* was important game for Grolet personally, but why should we regard it as an important game in the greater scheme of things? "I think it was the first game with an open-ended 3D immersive world that the player could explore at his own convenience, at his own pace and in the order he


Left to right: programmers Yves Grolet and Yann Robert with *Outcast* designer Franck Sauer



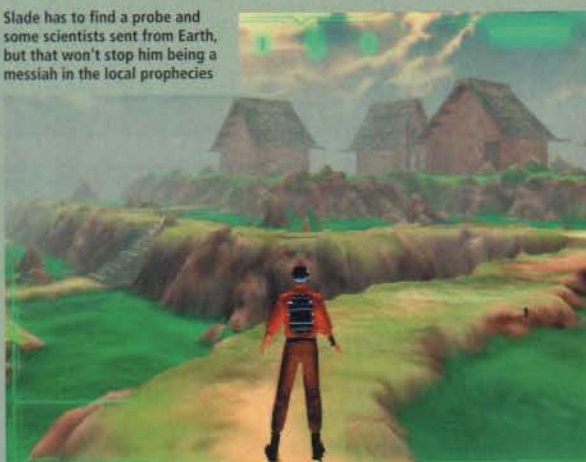

Outcast was given a lavish orchestral score by the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. The sweeping classical strings sit rather at odds with some of the game's content



THE OUT-TAKES

Outcast featured hours of voice acting, each and every being in the world making for a possible conversation, or even a song, should the mood take them. These mammoth recording sessions weren't without their mishaps, and the frustrations of voicing an alien world is demonstrated with colourful and humorous effect on Outcast's official website (www. outcast-thegame.com). The site's lavish video section still hosts out-take videos, which match in-game visuals to the voice-acting out-takes that never made it into the game itself, for sometimes hilarious effect.





Slade has to find a probe and some scientists sent from Earth, but that won't stop him being a messiah in the local prophecies

wanted," explains Grolet. "It was also the first time that a game blended action and adventure in a seamless manner and without scarring either of those two components."

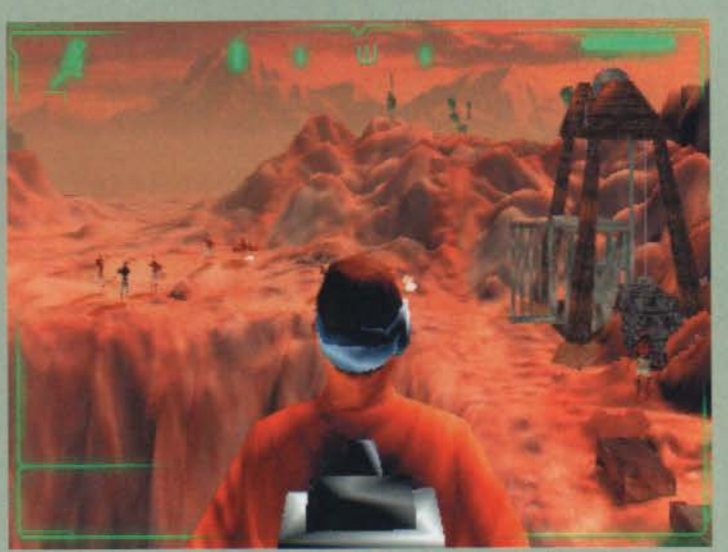
Outcast's alien planet was populated by a vibrant culture that swept from peasant-filled paddy fields to grim and dusty deserts. Once the tutorial (infamous for its near-impossible stealth training) was out of the way, players were able to access any of the huge terrains that made up the game's different regions. Go anywhere, talk to anyone, you just had to stay alive long enough to unravel the bigger mysteries. Working with the natives against their oppressors was an epic task and keeping people on-side took some work for even the most dedicated roleplayers. For Appeal this meant a massive effort in scripting conversations and creating robust AI for the alien peoples.

Grolet is keen to emphasise this point: "*Outcast* was a game that featured an alien world that appeared alive with citizens 'living' their lives during the game. The AI was one of the most difficult parts to develop because the citizens had to do their job, react to the player missions, react to the player reputation and also react to danger and combat happening around them. The difficulty was to have the citizens prioritise and select the appropriate behaviours at any moment of the game."

For the most part, this approach was extremely rewarding. Even contemporary games such as *Morrowind* have struggled to provide such a sophisticated and believable game world, one in which NPCs aren't simply mannequin conversations waiting to happen. Grolet is justifiably proud of his team's success in making people feel like they could approach a living world in any way they saw fit. Even massively multiplayer games have not yet reached the same level of complexity and believability that *Outcast* achieved.

Nevertheless, many gamers were put off by the unusual visuals, as Grolet concedes: "The biggest failure is that the software rendering appeared a bit outdated at the release of the game." Appeal had made the decision to employ voxels, the 3D pixel technology made infamous by Novalogic's *Comanche* and *Delta Force* games. The 3D card revolution that

Outcast's alien planet was populated by a vibrant culture that swept from peasant-filled paddy fields to grim and dusty deserts



Outcast's voxels generate some realistic-looking terrain, but the 3D engine is perhaps at its most effective when handling water effects, producing collections of pools full of gorgeously lapping liquid

was taking place around the development of *Outcast* meant that traditional polygons had leapt ahead in sophistication, leaving the CPU-dependent voxel system looking clumsy and outmoded. "At the beginning of the development of *Outcast*, 3D cards did not exist," says Grolet. "We decided to use voxels because it was a method that allowed us to render realistic landscapes. We decided to render landscapes instead of indoor environments because it was refreshing and different from the other games. Moreover, natural landscapes were a richer source of inspiration for us to make a world that allowed the player to dream about epic adventures."

Outcast's rolling landscapes and wondrous water effects did indeed entrance many gamers, but it didn't









Voxels look good on a magazine page, but they actually blow up to look exceedingly blocky on-screen. Challenging for the average PC of the time, the unusual 3D tech now runs perfectly on a decent machine

stand up to the likes of id Software's *Quake* technologies for sheer visual impact. "The difficulty we encountered with voxels was that the image cleanness was not as good as the ones rendered with 3D cards that started to appear during the development and dominated the market at the release of the game," explains Grolet. "We had to face a transition of technology and we decided to stick to our initial choice to stay coherent with our vision of huge and detailed natural landscapes."

While the use of voxels did bring with it some significant constraints, particularly on how detailed character models could be, they did allow for a landscape of a kind of size and complexity that is only just being achieved by polygonal approaches today. But for gamers who'd just invested in shiny graphics cards it wasn't really an option to splash out on new a CPU for a quirky French adventure game, no matter how impressive its ambitions. Voxels fell from grace, with *Outcast* acting as their death knell. Subsequent CPU power increases mean that this distinctive 3D approach might one day make a return, perhaps in further hybrid approaches like that of *Black Hawk Down*, where Novalogic mixed voxels with mainstream polygonal models. But they were not to be used for *Outcast II*, a game for which Appeal would take quite a different, and ultimately fatal, approach.

With critical success and a small but enthusiastic fanbase behind it, *Outcast* was well set for a sequel, but Grolet wasn't to be a part of that doomed project: "I quit Appeal at the beginning of the development because I did not agree with my ex-associates on the way to handle *Outcast II*. I would rather not go into details here. Unfortunately, two years after my departure, Atari – then Infogrames – decided to cancel *Outcast II*. It was a sad decision that disappointed everybody."

Yet *Outcast* still persists on the fringes of PC gaming, a part of the free-roaming adventure lineage that stretches from the ancient 3D adventure *Midwinter* right up to present-day offerings such as *STALKER* and *Morrowind*. The internet has proved a haven for the iconoclastic adventure, with an effort to create a sequel to *Outcast* being undertaken on an open-source website, where fans of the game have taken on the old voxel engine and attempted to give it new life with their Open Outcast development project. Point your web browser towards www.openoutcast.de to check up on the continuing legacy of one of PC gaming's brightest stars.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Rebellion

DATE FOUNDED: 1992

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 110

HEADS OF STUDIO: Jason Kingsley (CEO and creative director, below right) and Chris Kingsley (chief technical officer, below left)



URL: www.rebellion.co.uk

DIVISIONS
Rebellion Games Development, 2000 AD Publishing, AudioMotion Studios, Fearnort Motion Pictures

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
World War Zero (PS2), *Judge Dredd: Dredd Versus Death* (GC, PC, PS2, Xbox), *Gunfighter 2* (PS2), *Aliens Versus Predator* (PC), *Delta Force Urban Warfare* (PS1), *Rainbow Six* (PS1), *Judge Dredd Cityquake* (mobile), *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf* (GBA), *Medal Of Honor Underground* (GBA)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:
Action (FPS and thirdperson); PS2, Xbox and PC online; conversions; wireless





Aliens Vs Predator **(top) was a massive hit for Rebellion long before the movie was produced, while** ***Sniper Elite*** **(above) homes in on a skill beloved of firstperson shooter fans everywhere**

REBELLION



UK LOCATIONS:
Head office in central Oxford, UK. Film and motion-capture studio in Osney Mead, Oxford, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Sniper Elite (PS2, PC, Xbox), *Rogue Trooper* (PS2, Xbox; SCi), PS2 project TBA, PSP project TBA

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY

"Rebellion has enjoyed a consistent track record of developing groundbreaking, award-winning games for more than 12 years, including a whole host of best-sellers such as *Aliens Vs Predator*, *Rainbow Six: Lone Wolf* and *Delta Force: Urban Warfare*.

"Much of Rebellion's success has been due to its powerful Asura Engine and Tools suite, which allows games to be developed or converted with unrivalled speed.

"At the time of writing, Asura runs fully-featured on the PC, PlayStation2, Xbox and GameCube, and is in development for the PSP and the next generation of consoles – since Asura was designed from day one to be a versatile cross-platform architecture, porting to new platforms is extremely straightforward.

"The engine offers internet multiplayer on all platforms. But Asura is much more than a game engine. The Asura Tools suite is renowned as being one of the best systems in the industry, offering unparalleled ease of use and turnaround speed. Artists and designers can literally switch between a running game and the tools at a press of a single key, allowing for complex changes to be made instantly, and games to be debugged on the fly.

"Asura's cross-platform lighting system uses a global illumination model to create hyper-realistic environment lighting with stunning detail. The system can model any light source, including area light sources of arbitrary topology, and effects such as scattering and absorption, reflection and refraction at surfaces are correctly modelled. Rapid feedback is provided to artists by a realtime photon-mapping algorithm. Using spherical harmonics, characters and objects can be lit by an effectively infinite number of dynamic lights, as well as by the global illumination solution, so they merge seamlessly into the environment lighting.

"Asura also has a fully featured, proprietary physics system utilising continuous collision detection and advanced spatial partitioning techniques. The system handles particles, fully rotating rigid bodies and more complex structures such as ragdolls, cloth, fully interactive water, etc.

"Naturally, Asura supports a fully flexible vertex and pixel fragment shader system, providing a complex wealth of visual detail and effects."

Billboards for sale

We already have plenty of product placement, but in-game advertising's next step could be the dynamically-updated Massive Advertising Network

www.hivepartners.com
www.massiveincorporated.com

It was media guru Marshall McLuhan who first pointed out the circular logic of the phrase 'adverts don't have any effect on me'. That people noticed adverts was enough to change their buying habits, whether or not this worked in favour of particular products, he argued. Thirty years on, advertising has become a much more slippery commodity. But with corporations spending over $300 billion globally, its overall effectiveness is no longer an issue for debate. Everywhere there are eyeballs seeking entertainment there is advertising, and this is becoming increasingly true in the case of games.

One reason is purely negative: the perceived impact of games on the TV viewing habits of young men. Last year, US TV rating company Nielsen Media reported a fall in the amount of prime-time TV viewing among 18-34-year-old men. Similarly, a less rigorous study by Ziff Davis Digital Gaming in America reckoned a quarter of gamers had swapped TV watching time for playing time.

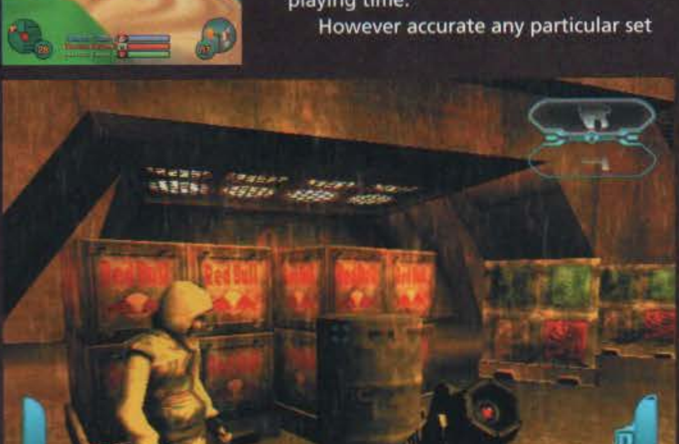
However accurate any particular set of figures, one of the clearest examples of mainstream media concern was the action of Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone. The billionaire octogenarian, who runs the advertising-oriented media conglomerate that owns CBS as well as cable TV, radio and billboard divisions, spent over $200 million of his own money buying a controlling stake in ailing game publisher Midway. The reason, according to his daughter, Shari Redstone – now Midway's vice chairman – was that, unlike television, with games you know the consumers' eyeballs are glued to the screen.

Equally the tendency of games to be reality- and brand-based is another reason they're becoming more attractive to advertisers. One of many recent deals has seen Reebok sign a financially undisclosed multi-title agreement with EA. Starting with *NFL Street 2*, Reebok products such as its NFL-licensed range and the Pump Paydirt Bringback crosstrainer will be featured.

"Our goal of enrolling youth into the brand through sports, entertainment and technology manifests itself perfectly in games like this. It's an important and extremely effective part of our integrated marketing model," commented **Brian Povinelli**, Reebok's vice president of integrated marketing.

Yet there's one company out to revolutionise the relationship between advertisers and gamers. Massive Inc is in the early stages of rolling out its in-game dynamic advertising network. Imaginatively called the Massive Advertising Network, its unique selling point is flexibility. While developers just put placeholder billboards or videoscreens into their environments, the network will download appropriate product adverts to fill the gaps depending on the gamer's age, social demographic group or even seasonal events, whenever they go online.

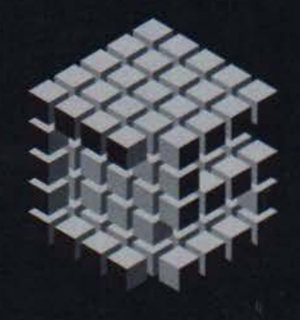
"Our in-game advertising is delivered in a seamless manner that does not interfere with gameplay in any way,"





Advertising in games has been with us for a long time, as seen in these shots from *Judge Dredd: Dredd Vs Death* and *Worms 3D* show. These static methods of advertising, although no doubt lucrative for the companies involved at the time, are made obsolete by new insertion methods









And this is what the Massive system will look like. Although only displaying made-up brands, the company expects to feature in forthcoming *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow 6* games from Ubisoft





reckons **Richard Skeen**, Massive's vice president of advertising sales. And because of the network structure, the system can be aggregated across many different game titles, potentially providing advertisers with the large number of eyeballs they require. Another advantage of such a system is that advertisers can gain clear feedback about how many people have seen their product, when they saw it and for how long. This can then be used to see what effect adverts have on their business.

Already live with *Mall Tycoon* and *Ski Tycoon*, two games from Take Two's budget arm Global Star, Skeen says the company will be launching 30 titles during the year, providing advertisers with an audience of around three million in the 18-34-year-old male demographic.

But, of course, there are some key problems to be ironed out before the network will be financially viable. First, it relies on as many publishers as possible to integrate the Massive Advertising Network SDK into their games. Of the large publishers Ubisoft, Atari, Konami and Vivendi have signed up so far, and there's also the sticky issue of platform coverage. Currently limited to PC games, it's unclear whether Sony, Nintendo and particularly Microsoft will allow Massive access to their consoles' online networks. Nevertheless, Massive says it will introduce a console-based product by the summer.

Yet others point out that in such a nascent situation both advertisers and game companies should exercise some caution. Once a business development director for UK studio The Bitmap Brothers, **Ed Bartlett** now runs Hive Partners, which offers creative services to game developers. Despite having placed brands such as Red Bull in games such as *Judge Dredd* and *Worms*, he says that as more mainstream advertisers get involved in games there is potential to damage brands and games.

"You only have to think about how annoying pop-ups are on the internet," he explains. Instead, Hive prefers to work at a lower level where products and their relation to gameplay are more integrated. One example is the forthcoming *Manx TT* racing game from Jester Interactive, where an as-yet-unannounced sponsor will be associated with the power boost option.

Bartlett says such relationships work out better for both parties, with the advertiser placed in the optimum context and the developer and publisher maintaining the integrity of their product while generating extra revenue. "And in the current commercial climate, developers understand they need to embrace such opportunities in order to survive," he points out. Yet even with such activity there's still a long way to go before games attract serious advertising money. In 2003, US advertisers spent $12 billion on TV spots targetting young men. The equivalent figure for in-game ads was $10 million.



Tracking eyeballs

One of the main obstacles to the widespread adoption of in-game advertising is the need for good statistics. With this in mind, TV ratings group Nielsen Interactive Entertainment is running several trials to track both the interaction of gamers with in-game ads as well as attitudes towards different types of adverts. Research with Massive concerning the best way to measure and validate the data from the Massive Advertising Network will underpin its full commercial launch for ad buyers during early summer. A separate initiative with Activision has studied players' reaction to adverts for Jeep placed within the PC version of *THUG 2* (above).

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Adult entertainment

BY GARY PENN

Smoking, drug abuse, 'language', violence, nudity, sex, sexuality, paraphilia... How naturally, comfortably can mature content so well represented in established media be woven into play? Become play? Will become play? Should become play?

Violence in play tends to be thoughtless – throwaway, careless, simplistic, remote, detached. A pity, partly because it's a wasted opportunity. Actual violence is deplorable but fictitious violence within the safety of paper or celluloid or digital media is to be encouraged, especially when it opens our eyes to the animal inside and appreciate what it means to suffer or take a life.

Like its media peers, virtual space should be used to express violence as an art form – exploiting and exploring the notion of using proficiency and panache to commit violent acts, akin to sculptors, painters and performance artists. Perhaps using vehicles and skill to carefully, considerately knock down pedestrians before relentlessly manipulating their increasingly mutilated bodies, wheelspinning on their stunned forms to create elaborate crimson plumes, dragging and smearing them along the street, crushing and bursting them like overripe berries against walls, repeatedly ramming them until their mashed forms decorate the scenery, Pollocking the environment... What justification for such carnage?

The fact remains that destruction is satisfying – especially at the expense of others, especially when someone has spent time constructing something and we know that means something to that someone. And a life usually means the most to most of us.

Reading about or watching the exploits of serial killers is one thing – but to play as one? Actors already do for our benefit. But the director told him to do it – inspired by the writer writing wrongs. You only watched, helpless, unable – perhaps even unwilling to act. In play you have no such excuses. You don't just view – you do. Of course, it's already common to play a serial killer but the role isn't formally recognised through ceremony. Allowing players to kill the innocent relentlessly and remorselessly is one thing, but to identify the fact, admit to its existence, endorse it, honour it, celebrate it – that's a line waiting to be crossed.

There are more than playscape boundaries to define when building simulations of a real world for play. Living, breathing cities wholly populated by all-white males of average stature and demeanour is fine for making a statement but it's hardly an authentic contemporary civilised setting – a foundation in reality to make the experience all the more accessible and stimulating. Some plausible variation is required: some ladies, different races, different heights and weights, different ages, perhaps even a representation of disabilities. Cue: issues.

> Allowing players to kill the innocent remorselessly is one thing, but to identify the fact – that's a line waiting to be crossed

Using a toy adult male to drive a toy car into toy children in a toy playground has natural (physical) results – one model with statistics superior to another imparts forces and the result is broken toys. Of course, the toy children could just as easily be cardboard boxes but there are distinctive visual forms to stimulate – and itch the conscience.

Brazen sex has rarely featured in commercial games beyond the ceremonial but it won't be long before fucking is more strongly and casually integrated into the role play, perhaps like fighting but with kissing replacing kicking, stroking instead of punching, trading different kinds of blows – a nod towards 'rhythm action' perhaps, literally making music, sparks, fireworks, effects reflecting the quality of your performance.

With sex and violence in the same space, virtual rape becomes reality (well, the suggestion of rape – it's not as if a toy can't consent). And if the victim is a child doll... Not that the software cares: it's just another model obeying the same natural rules as everything else.

Over the past 30 years, millions of us have committed countless violent acts including shooting, stabbing, bludgeoning, burning, bursting, crushing, beheading, exploding – even genocide and suicide. Those thugs, monsters, aliens obviously mean trouble and deserve it because they are bad to the core – they started it so it's self-defence or valid moral vengeance.

Who thinks twice about such atrocities? Since when did anyone care about the perspective of the victims? Were they really asking for it? Perhaps you were the invader in their space? So seldom are the blatantly virtuous ever on the receiving end. Defenceless bystanders are usually dumb animals or seemingly willing participants. What makes a cluster of pixels, an assemblage of polygons and textures wrapped around a virtual skeleton more than the sum of its parts – something meaningful, regrettable? Its role? Motivation? Performance? The fact that it runs or crawls away from your relentless persecution, wide-eyed in terror when you assault it? That it doesn't run but cowers, pissing itself, crying, begging, screaming for mercy, attempting to justify its right to life? What makes you kill and care so little?

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





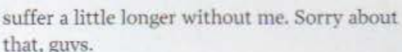
TRIGGER HAPPY

The rooftops of Paris

Half-Life 2 makes me sick. Not in the way that it is doubtless making rival developers sick, in that it's so astonishingly good and has so casually raised the bar way beyond what other games are doing or even had thought of doing. No, sadly, this masterpiece gives me stomach-churning motion sickness. Some people get it with any FPS; the Japanese are known to be more susceptible. But it's not something I've experienced since I watched a friend complete a level on *GoldenEye* purely by slapping the enemy around. Back then it was a combination of alcohol, low framerate and watching, rather than doing, that made me feel queasy. Here I don't know what it is – I've tried widening the field of vision and reducing graphics settings to near-*3D Monster Maze* quality to no avail – but I can't be Gordon Freeman any longer for the moment. The depressed citizens of City 17 will have to suffer a little longer without me. Sorry about that, guys.

So I can only offer a partial, provisional list of little things I love about *Half-Life 2*. The way Freeman never speaks, and the way other characters turn this into a running joke, is a perfect riposte to either the clunky choose-your-own-adventure-style dialogic choices offered by such games as *Deus Ex*, or the way other games just don't notice that you float through them as dumb as a plastic mannequin. The abundant wide-open dynamic spaces give you a sense of tactical freedom, but are also designed with exquisite subtlety always to channel you in the right direction. You're thrilled at being hunted, yet you don't feel as though you are being herded through a linear maze; somehow you just sense that one particular way is the right way to go. And you're always right, which is to say that the game is always right too.

The city itself is a masterclass in downbeat beauty. When too many games resemble the result of a riot in an art director's studio, all clashing styles and lurid colour schemes, the subdued hues and dramatic skies of *Half-Life 2*, along with the attention lavished on the despairing expressions of the downtrodden populace, add up to something approaching a tragic aesthetic grandeur. We could talk physics, weapons and vehicles, too, the whole box of toys that the game offers, but for me a large part of the genius of *Half-Life 2* is a crane glinting near the horizon in the distance, or the pink hue of a sunset sky reflected in rippling water. This is an environment that has been given character through countless tiny touches, through the fears and dreams of its inhabitants. It offers an unparalleled sense of place, filled with foreboding and threat and yet a hope that beauty might survive the conflagration.



> I have been exploring City 17 and the City of Light, the one calling to me from the other, the second an escape from the first

But, as I said, I can't go there any more. So instead I go outside to get some fresh air and explore the new city on my doorstep, which is Paris. I've been visiting this area in the 18th arrondissement regularly for over a year, so it's not entirely novel to me, but there's a lot more to discover when you actually live here. Just as with a *Grand Theft Auto* game, you start off bewildered by the scale of the place, and quickly learn a few major routes to places of interest. Then you start exploring nooks and alleyways, and learn some shortcuts. Before long you automatically know how to get to a few familiar Pay 'n' Spray facilities and gunshops – or, as it may be in my somewhat less crime-infested neighbourhood, cafés and patisseries. It's funny how the process of learning a virtual city has become so close to the process of learning a real one, and how strategies for the former can inform the latter.

Game culture is pervasive here, too – my local Métro station is plastered with huge poster ads for *San Andreas*. But there is also the delightful, whimsical and oddly haunting phenomenon of the mosaic space invaders. For a few years, an incognito artist has been placing little space invaders made out of small ceramic coloured tiles on the external walls of buildings in Paris. They wink at you as you turn a corner, or gaze down at you through your café window. Other people, from time to time, come and remove the mosaics. When this happens, the artist returns and writes a score in the space vacated by the alien – it might be five points or 10 points, depending on how difficult it had been to capture (height above ground, accessibility of nearest window, and so on). The creator and his devoted pilferers are locked in a slow-motion game, which turns the environment into another kind of virtual playground.

Thus I have been exploring City 17 and the City of Light, the one calling to me from the other, the second an escape from the first. I hope to be able to return to *Half-Life 2*, nurturing the hope that some recondite technical setting might ameliorate my nausea, but for now the rooftops of the real city symbolise a new challenge.

And that, readers, is my Paris game life this month.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). www.stevenpoole.net




BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

White-collar fraud online

A widely held prejudice is that gamers don't read (present company excepted, of course). But this summer a newly written opus, by and for gamers, was published chapter by chapter, Dickens-style, on somethingawful.com. The Great Scam, 15,000 words by an author known only as Nightfreeze, was read by hundreds, then by hundreds of thousands, until the server collapsed. This was no fan-fiction, but fan-fact. 'This is a story of deception, intrigue, and double-crosses," the story began. "It is a story of liars, bandits, and greed. This is the story of my life in *Eve Online*'.

Eve Online, a massively multiplayer virtual universe designed for trading and space combat, was Nightfreeze's life. He spent more time navigating the *Eve* universe than navigating his campus hallways. Bored and restless, he and his best friend Trazir decided to form a partnership. Another trader, HardHead, lent them 3 million.

They bought a colossal ship, poured their cash into computers, and within three hours had doubled their money. They were in business.

Their only obstacles were pirates. Every trade run, privateers homed in on their lumbering ship and demanded payment. When they refused, the pirates lasered their ship to ashes. With hardly any firepower, all they could do was run – so they learned to run in style with expensive engines, micro-warp drives (MWDs), which could rocket their ship to safety. The pirates ate exhaust fumes. Within two weeks, Nightfreeze was worth close to 85 million. Then the universe changed the rules.

One morning, two months into his lucrative new career, Nightfreeze baited the pirates as usual, waited until they closed in, then activated his drives. Which didn't work. The enraged pirates destroyed his ship – 35 million worth of hardware and 40 million in cargo. In revenge for his insults, they shot up his escape pod, too.

The pirates, unhappy with the MWDs, had complained to the gods – the developers – and the gods had listened. Suddenly, the drives barely worked. But nobody had told Nightfreeze. His fledgling career – and two months of his life – was in ashes. He was about to log off permanently in disgust, but then had a better idea. The rules didn't care for him; why should he care for the rules? He made a call to his friend, who agreed. They would perpetrate the biggest scam the universe had ever seen.

To establish their con, they paid 20 new players 10,000 credits each to join their 'corporation', named ZZZBest (after an infamously fraudulent carpet cleaning firm.) In-world, on noticeboards and in instant messages to all their trading partners, the pair announced their mission: to acquire the blueprints for an Apocalypse battleship, the most powerful in the game. These cost 1.2 billion; by combining their purchase power, they claimed, they would offer the same blueprint to each investor for just 100 million. Slowly, their offer began to attract potential partners. They populated bulletin boards with fake investors, and arranged a fake chatroom 'investor conference'. One investor – the largest – insisted on speaking with Nightfreeze in person. Nightfreeze gave the number of his local library payphone, and sprinted to catch the call. The investor said yes.

> Nightfreeze's memoir is the first work of literature to alter the laws of the universe. Dickens would be proud

By 9am the next morning, Nightfreeze's account held 480 million credits (worth nearly $3,000 US). He transferred the money to a dummy character. Then, with one click of his mouse, deleted his account. After gloating in reply to a few instant-message death threats, he cancelled his IM accounts too. It was the perfect crime – the criminal no longer existed.

But what now? His half of the money belonged to a new character without pilot skills; he had hundreds of millions, but nothing to buy. He toyed with a few passing ships, and was instantly killed. Somehow, it barely seemed worth it. Nightfreeze hailed a passing player, Frosttt, in a beginner ship, asking: "What would you say if I were to offer you 300 million?"

"I'd say pretty cool," said Frosttt. Nightfreeze wired all his credits over and logged off. He never logged in again, and began to pen his story.

In the real world, time is money; in a virtual world, money is time. Despite complaints, the investors got no compensation. Their loss – the time it took to earn their credits – had no legal value. Game developers need it that way, otherwise every bug, closure or game change would be followed by a class action suit. The games would become true economies; every player would have to fill in a tax return.

After it became clear there would be no payback, the *Eve Online* bulletin boards erupted in fury. That's how virtual worlds affect us: once the borders with the real world are threatened, we feel threatened too. Only one level-headed commentator pointed out the double standards: "You can be a pirate in this game, but you can't be a white-collar criminal."

No one heard from Nightfreeze again. *Eve Online*'s terms of service have been changed to warn against such scams; Nightfreeze's memoir is the first work of literature to alter the laws of the universe. Dickens would be proud.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



HALF-LIFE 2: THE MOVIE FIRST

DRAFT - TOP SECRET

several rounds into body of the HEADCRAB. Gordon gives the creature one final look of disdain, and runs into a nearby alleyway.
CUT TO:

68. EXT. CITY 17 - PLAYGROUND - DAY

GORDON enters the rusting playground, as distant gunfire echoes off the walls.

Satisfied he is entirely alone, he picks up a concrete BREEZEBLOCK with his gravity gun, and fires it against a wall.

Spotting the apparatus before him, Gordon climbs up a SEE-SAW, and down the other side.

He spends several minutes playing with a child s SWING, throwing it through the air. He tries to jump on to the seat with little success, and then piles the breezeblock onto the seat. He successfully shoots it off with his shotgun.

As he goes about this, there is an imperceptible SADNESS in Gordon s blank expression. Perhaps he never had access to such things in his own youth, or maybe he s only just realised how gravity works.

With the swing still rocking gently, and his thoughts clouded, Gordon turns his back on the playground, and out into:
CUT TO:

69. EXT. CITY 17 - RUINED STREET - CONTINUOUS

GORDON skips down the street, occasionally pirouetting in the air. He stops suddenly, and starts attacking a wall with his crowbar.

Is he angry? Insane? It is impossible to tell.

A pair of COMBINE TROOPS round a corner and open up a volley of fire.

COMBINE TROOP
There he is!

GORDON fells both troops with his shotgun. He fires a couple more shots into their prone bodies just to be sure. Just to be doubly sure, he attacks their corpses with his crowbar.

And then throws a cardboard box at them.

And then tries shooting them across the street using his GRAVITY GUN.

Finally satisfied his enemies are dead, GORDON hops gaily down the street, and around the corner, where he spots a squad of RESISTANCE SOLDIERS under sniper fire from a nearby building.

RESISTANCE SOLDIER
Is it...? It is - Gordon Freeman. Finally - some luck. We re under fire from that nearby building, Freeman. You scout ahead and take out the sniper while we cover you. Got that?

GORDON starts jumping up and down, wordlessly. He smashes a shop window with his crowbar, and opens fire on a cardboard box.

RESISTANCE SOLDIER
(continued)
Good. We ll take it from here!

The RESISTANCE SOLDIERS open fire on the sniper.

GORDON picks up another cardboard box, and throws it at one of the Resistance Soldiers. It rebounds off the Soldier s head. The Soldier is unmoved by Gordon s actions.

RESISTANCE SOLDIER
(continued)
You d better get going, Freeman.

GORDON fires his GRAVITY GUN at the shell of a burned-out car. It bounces across the ruined street.

GORDON starts attacking a wall with his crowbar. He picks up a wooden palette, and throws it at the RESISTANCE SOLDIERS. Unworried by his behaviour, they bravely continue firing on the sniper s position.

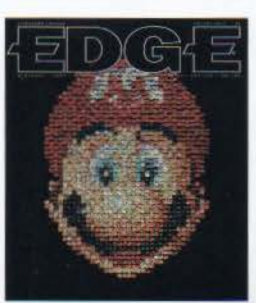
GORDON jumps up and down in the middle of the street. He is shot repeatedly by the sniper. Gravely wounded, he retires to cover. Bleeding profusely, he shoots apart a cardboard box, revealing a medical kit. Seconds later, the bleeding has stopped, and GORDON looks as healthy as ever.

The RESISTANCE SOLDIERS continue firing on the sniper.

GORDON opens fire on the RESISTANCE SOLDIERS. His bullets don t have any effect on them.

Undeterred, GORDON piles an oil barrel on top of a wooden crate, and tries in vain to jump on top of it.

inbox



Issue 145

I can't drive and have virtually zero interest in cars, and yet Top Gear still manages to be one of the most engaging hours of my TV week. This made me think how much British gaming needs a show like this – intelligent, brilliantly entertaining (even to those without any interest in the subject matter), and possessing a strong sense of opinion on everything to do with the industry – for itself.

What would the chances be of the BBC expanding the Top Gear brand to try a videogame show? The same studio, the same format, the live audience, and different, but equally knowledgeable and entertaining hosts. And a name? Would Top Score be too cheesy?
Mark Muldoon

Yep, you can say what you like about Clarkson (and the small one and the posh one whose names no one remembers), but there's no getting away from the fact that Top Gear can be a good laugh. Who would you get to present the videogame version, though? And which game would you have as the celeb challenge? We doubt, somehow, that the producers would get it quite right.

Welcome to the age of fast graphics, release parties and the I-want-more ethos. Gibberish, I know, but I must admit I am quite annoyed about where gaming seems to be going. Remember the good old days when games were about more than how many pixels you could cram into one frame or how fast your refresh rate was?

Things are spiralling out of control. We're no longer content with what we have; we are forever looking to the future for the next big release, the next sequel/prequel/spin-off.

I have to look back over the years and ask: where did we go astray? When did we stop enjoying the games we have and start wanting the next big revelation in games technology, the next generation of FPS/RTS/MMOG? The release of *Half-Life 2* was supposed to be a massive landmark for all of gaming because of the massively brilliant first game. And Valve took their time and didn't rush things just to satisfy marketing people – or the gaming populous, for that matter. But then we look at *Halo 2*, rushed into production to satisfy a needy Xbox market hungry for a big title, and it shows (oh my, how it shows). I remember seeing Bungie's videos for *Halo* when it was an amazing Mac title before Microsoft ensnared them and there was no question that time and effort had been applied in bundles.

So I put a question to all gamers: are you going to be part of this new, insatiable gaming monstrosity, or are you going to change your ideas about gaming, be content with what you have, and thereby encourage developers to put the time and effort into their games that both they and you deserve?
Stevie McClatchey

When did we stop enjoying the games we have and start wanting the next big revelation in games technology, the next generation of FPS/RTS/MMOG?

But it isn't a 'new monstrosity', is it? Haven't videogamers always wanted tomorrow today? Of course, this doesn't mean some of us couldn't benefit from taking a step back every once in a while. Dare you risk it?

As a UK ex-pat living in Australia I've noticed significant differences between the UK and Australian markets – for example, poor availability of games in this country (in particular for the GameCube, which distributors have all but abandoned) and poor access to fast broadband (I live in the centre of Sydney and yet I still cannot connect to Xbox Live).

However, let's face it: Australia has fantastic sunny weather, I live a stone's throw from a surfing beach, we have good public transport, outstanding food... and the games here are better.

The Australian release of *Halo 2*, for example, scored a whopping ten compared to the lowly UK release which could only muster a nine. Same goes for *GTA: San Andreas*. Meanwhile, the Australian version of *Paper Mario* scraps in with a respectable nine. The UK version was only an eight.

"You've obviously been reading some 'official' console magazine," I hear you chuckle. Not so. These were the scores from the Australian Christmas 2004 edition of **Edge**, a magazine containing in total no less than three tens – almost matching the number awarded in the entire last decade (the third ten in **Edge** Australia was *Half-Life 2*).

Personal opinions aside (*Halo 2* and *GTA: SA* do not deserve ten and the UK reviews explain exactly why this is so), why are you letting the Australian writers destroy your hard-earned and well-respected reputation? Or are the games here really that much better?

Maybe I should start exporting Australian games... *Driver 3*, anyone?
Tom Durkin

While **Edge** is licensed to Australia, it remains a separate publication. In other words, the content of **Edge** Australia is that of **Edge** Australia, not **Edge**.

I simply love the *Half-Life 2* dev team, and if I ever meet any of them, I will kiss them. The reason for this isn't (just) that they delivered us an awesome game, though. The actual reason is much simpler: the subtitles. I was dumbstruck by the 'hard-of-hearing' subtitles offered by the game. Being hearing impaired myself, it was something awesome, and I found myself immersed with the game on a deeper level than ever before. And for a gamer of two decades that says a lot.

I hope other developers take notice of this and will implement the feature in their games too. All too frequently I have found myself wanting to kick someone's ass for an otherwise great game lacking subtitles. (Working in the field of software engineering myself, I know from experience that creating a subtitling system isn't really that hard either, so that's no excuse.)

Over the years there have been too many games I would've loved to play but have been forced to leave them on store shelves due to lacking subtitles. *Blade Runner* was one of the first of this kind, the *Thief* series also was left



gathering dust; lately I've missed *Prince Of Persia* and *Splinter Cell*.

And I know for certain I'm not alone with my decisions. I personally know many people, both hearing impaired and not, who have chosen to leave an otherwise-interesting game gathering dust because it doesn't offer subtitles. Although every one of these people is more or less fluent in English, they still prefer it written, not spoken, especially when voice acting involves accents and dramatic effects. If even some English people have trouble with a cockney drawl, how the hell is the rest of the world supposed to understand it? And in the middle of a nerve-breaking firefight we'd prefer a curt text message instead of a shrill voice screaming something that is lost amidst all the other noise.

So, if developers really want to maximise their sales potential, I'd strongly recommend them to include subtitles in their games (and not just for the actual game sections, but also for FMVs). Please do this, and we'll thank you with our wallets.
Perttu Mäkelä, Finland

Is there anything Valve's game *doesn't* do well? (OK, don't mention the online hassles.) On a related note, have a look at www.deafgamers.com, a fan-run site whose additional evidence shows that most developers need to get their acts together when it comes to subtitles.

Having just read the excellent Time Extend feature on *Eternal Darkness*, I am left wondering why your reviews do not take this form? Of course I am not suggesting spending six pages on each game, but this belated review told me more about the qualities of the game (and why I should want to play it) than any discussion about its combat system, weapons, or playability could have. In particular, here we learn something about the fundamental design and the reasons behind it, as well as an extended analysis of the storyline and why it does or doesn't work. Such things are also present in your normal reviews, of course, but there they tend to be stated abstractly. I understand the need to avoid spoilers, but surely some compromise is possible. After all, right now I feel like rushing out and buying *Eternal Darkness*, and considering I don't even own a GameCube, that's saying something...
Hans Guijt

But Time Extend, by its definition, is a reflective look, produced with the benefit of hindsight. There's the rub.

That's all we have space for this month; back to normal size next issue.

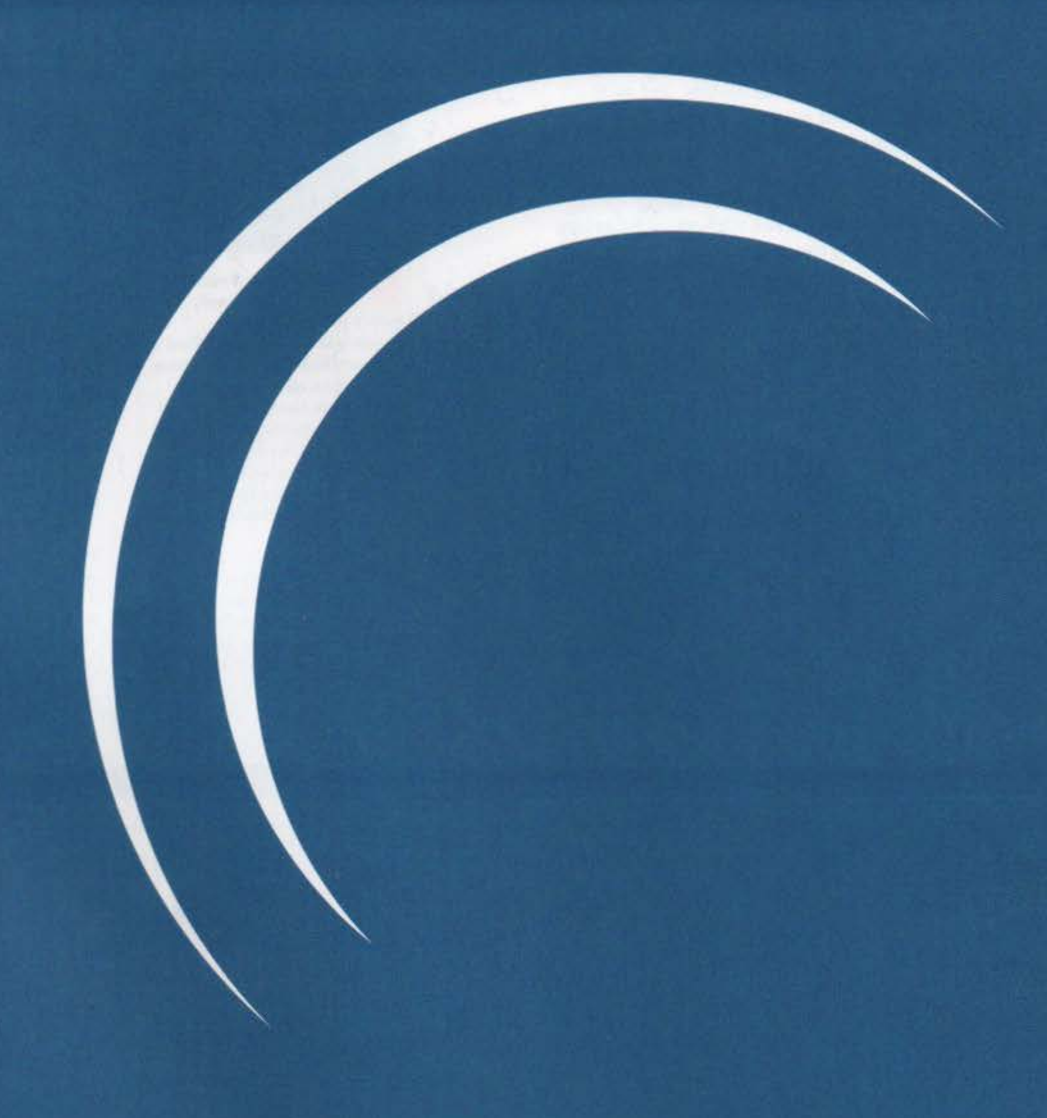


I must admit, I nearly didn't do it. I nearly didn't persevere. Max Headroom wasn't funny first time around. I'm talking about *Half-Life 2*, of course. But I pressed on, tweaking here and there, and eventually I came to realise why it was indeed the best game of 2004. Next time, though, can't you forewarn us about bugs like this?
J J Alexander

Unfortunately *Half-Life 2*'s audio-stuttering bugs weren't evident in the review build we used, so it wasn't an issue that needed addressing at the time. Well done for seeing it through, though.

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